

The King's Passport

H. Bedford-Jones



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BY H. BEDFORD-JONES

RODOMONT

ST. MICHAEL'S GOLD

THE BLACK BULL

THE KING'S PASSPORT

The King's Passport

By

H. Bedford-Jones

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"St. Michael's Gold," "The Black Bull," etc.



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THE KING'S PASSPORT

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by

H. Bedford-Jones

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DEDICATED IN GRATITUDE,
FRIENDSHIP AND ADMIRATION
TO
S. S. McCLURE

PREFACE

IN here sketching the real d'Artagnan, the author is conscious that his readers may encounter the gentleman with a slight sense of shock. Where is the romantic figure of Buckingham's day, of La Rochelle, of the Queen's diamond studs? Unhappily, he was then a boy of about five years. The very term d'Artagnan is a grammatical slip made by Dumas, and the soldier himself spelled his name "Artaignan," but the error has become so grounded in tradition that its use is here continued.

Cyrano is different. A slight shift of the dates, a slight exaggeration of his rhyming ability, and in the real man we find much the man of popular fancy. The peculiar tragedy of Cyrano's existence is, indeed, fascinating. The first swordsman of his day, his military career was ended by wounds and the Fagotin incident. He turned to the quill. When he had just attained the heights, a mistaken phrase in one of his comedies brought on the accusation of blasphemy, and he was shattered overnight.

PREFACE

Even tradition was unkind. He is popularly thought to have been killed by a roof-tile flung by enemies. As a matter of fact, the object was much more ignoble, the affair was an accident, and Cyrano lived above a year afterward until he died—from the effects of a malady now cured by every street-corner quack.

The passport given Nicholas Vaugon is authentic and in the possession of the author. It is in many features a unique document, and in endeavoring to solve some of the problems it suggested, this tale was in part evolved.

H. BEDFORD-JONES.

The passport referred to above is reproduced in facsimile on the end pages of the volume.

It was bought by the author at a Paris auction sale.

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CHAPTER I

STARLIGHT and evening cold, thin snow crisp on the street-stones; Paris in 1640.

Houses etched with snow-white roofs and gables, November wind sharp-howling up the Seine valley; the dark streets empty, desolate, unkindly.

Destiny, leading three men to her crossroads—three men, noble, prince, commoner.

To the bridge of Notre Dame came the first man. He paused in shelter of the parapet and gazed across at St. Germain in shivering indecision. He failed to see another figure come hurrying toward the bridge; the other failed to see him there in shadow. The two men collided sharply.

The man in haste snarled an oath of surprise, of fright, of anger. He whipped out a dagger and lunged furiously at the first man. The two grappled, reeled, slipped in the snow and came down together. Pierced through the heart by his own weapon, the

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assailant lay outsprawled and dead. Beside him two objects were fallen in the snow—a heavy purse, and a rolled document on thick vellum.

The first man knelt, found his assailant dead, picked up the two objects, and rose. Abruptly, the desolation gave tongue. The bridge held voices, bobbing yellow lanterns, archers of the "guet," the night-watch. No passing toward St. Germain now! Turn back to the Cité—turn, turn swiftly!

Hat pulled low, face muffled, the first man strode away rapidly and yet aimlessly, as one not knowing whither he went. Presently he came into a narrow and tortuous street, the Rue de la Juiverie. Light glimmered ahead, from the thick-glassed windows of a tavern, whose sign of a pinecone overhung the street.

Trampled snow here, heavily marked from the tavern doorway, sign of company lately departed. Peering in at the window, the first man saw the place all empty, still faintly blue with tobacco smoke. The door swung to his hand. He crossed to the darkest corner, flung the purse upon the table, and upon the host's appearance ordered supper at once, a sumptuous supper. Then he unrolled the vellum document and perused it.

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Destiny had accomplished its task, had brought the first man to the place appointed.

The second man appeared, meantime, in shadow of the nearby church of Ste. Magdaleine. A tall figure, Gascon oaths upon his lips, guardman's sash beneath his cloak. A companion was with him. Two figures in the dim snowy street by the church enclosure, pausing, conferring together.

"Mordious!" said the second man. "Then the spot suits you?"

"Agreed," said the other. "Luckily, M. de Cyrano, it is your sword I must face and not your nose—"

"En garde!" exclaimed the second man brusquely. "Brr! Too cold for long work—at the third riposte, I warn you. The third riposte, remember——"

The rasp of rapiers drawn from scabbard, the salute, the sharp click of crossed blades meeting, the sharper ring of steel against hilt. "One!" said the second man. His companion cursed him. "Two!" he said, and then laughed and bore back under a furious attack.

"Three!" His companion coughed and fell, pierced through the throat.

The second man stooped above him, rose with a

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shrug, wiped and replaced his blade. He stood listening. Clamor broke upon the night, sharp shouts, whistles. The watch? Perhaps. In any event, haste—the edict against duels meant death! The second man strode rapidly, with the air of knowing exactly whither he went. He came to the Pinecone Tavern, thrust open the door, looked around. Seeing the dim figure of the first man at a corner table, he himself picked the next darkest spot and settled down.

The second man had achieved the highway of his own destiny.

Out in the street was the third man of this fated trio. A smallish man, slender, very active, running, a man in shivering frantic haste. He was naked except for his fluttering shirt, held a crimsoned sword in hand, and cursed the half-frozen slops and garbage where his bare feet slipped. Somewhere far in his wake, a confused and clamorous uproar, a riot of voices and whistles.

Young, this third man, panting and desperate, but none the less shrewd. The glimmer of the Pinecone's windows shone ahead. He kept to the trampled street-center, glanced in at the window, saw the tavern apparently empty. No stop, no

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pause; he ran on, made a sudden leap to a house-wall where no snow lay. Then he turned, ran back to the tavern entrance. He flung open the door, stumbled in, and slammed the door again. A young man, yes, young, cold, excited, yet entirely master of himself.

The host appeared, to fling up both hands and stare open-mouthed.

"Name of a name! Such a costume—in this weather—"

"Silence!" chattered the third man. "They're after me—don't know who I am—get me clothes, food! I'm d'Artagnan, cadet in the guards—"

"Eh? Pursued, m'sieu? Aye, your sword—"

"Damnation!" cried d'Artagnan, torn betwixt cold and fury. "I was visiting a friend, jumped into the street—clothes and wine, fool! The watch is coming—"

He turned, saw the other two men there, and fell into abrupt dismayed silence.

The host of the Pinecone was used to emergencies, for beneath his roof gathered students and guardsmen, nobles and poets. If the greatest men of Paris sometimes came here, so did the wildest blades—and also the sergeants of the watch, to whom the

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Pinecone and its clientele were very well known.

"Come," said he, and caught the arm of d'Artagnan, hurrying him across the doorway giving on the kitchens. They disappeared together.

The third man, too, had come down fate's highway to the crossroad of his destiny.

In the great inn-room, none too well lighted, there was momentary silence. Then broke from the second man a gust of laughter, laughter and a hearty Gascon oath.

"Capedédious! Here's a new fashion of visiting. Ho, my shadowy unknown friend, did you see the stripling in his shirt? Visiting a friend, says he, and jumped into the street! Ho, ho, that's a good one! And the friend's husband came in unexpectedly, eh? Devil take me, where's our host? If I don't get some food before me, the watch will be along and raise the devil! They always blame me for any trouble—must make 'em think I've been here a while—"

In his shadowed corner, the first man chuckled.

"I've ordered everything in the place, so you're out of luck. Come and join me, if you like—I also want dinner on the table when the watch arrives. What do you say?"

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“Mordious! With all my heart!” cried the Gascon, and rose.

To the curious gaze of the first man, he displayed a most remarkable figure. He was tall and very long in the arm, obviously a born swordsman, since his movements were lithe and sure-footed. Also, he was young—two-and-twenty, at a guess. Twenty-one to be exact.

Heavy black brows shadowed two wide-set and most notable eyes—eyes glittering and gleaming with buried fires, eyes arrogant and challenging, yet filled with an oddly questing light as though searching for something everywhere denied him. It was not hard to imagine those eyes filled with savage glare; easier to imagine them gentle and melancholy. A man who covered his real self with a cloak of brag-gadocio.

Sensitive lips, swarthy face much scarred by wounds, black mustache—and a nose. Large noses were never uncommon in Paris, and to this day your born Parisian is in town slang a “big-beak”; still, here was something different, noteworthy. It was not the nose of a masquer, sticking straight out at the world. Instead, it was the curved, thin-nostriled beak of an eagle—larger than true proportion justi-

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fied, large enough to catch the attention at once.

The host came into the room, followed by a garçon bearing dishes. At sight of this standing figure he halted.

"Ah! You, M. Savinien! I did not see you here—"

In the street rang a whistle-blast.

"I'm here," said Savinien, striding to the table of the first man. "And I dine with this gentleman—down with the dinner! Sharpen your wits, François—get your naked man here with us, and swift about it! The watch is in the street now. Quick, man, quick!"

M. Savinien de Cyrano plumped himself into a chair as he spoke. The host wakened and made a dash for the kitchen. The garçon jumped to obey. Down came steaming capons, pewter plates and flagons, bread, knives, sauce. The first man, still a shadowy figure, slapped knife into flesh and hastily dumped portions on the plates.

"Another plate!" he exclaimed. "Move sharp, now!"

The Gascon whipped about a third chair and placed it at the table, while the waiter seized plate and mug from the rack above the hearth. An instant

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later d'Artagnan appeared at the kitchen door, buttoning a borrowed doublet. He was across the room in an instant, flinging himself into the third chair. A laugh broke on his lips as he eyed the other two men.

"Well met, comrades!" he exclaimed. "I owe you thanks—at your service!"

Voices in the street, whistles, trampling feet; the door was flung open. Into the tavern came stamping four sergeants of the watch with an officer, bringing in their wake hot oaths, cold air, the keen breath of snow.

"Ha!" cried the officer to the host. "Here are riots and tumults in the Cité, M. François, and all roads lead to your door! We have business here, it seems."

"Not with my guests, M. de Moray," said the host sturdily. "Here are only three gentlemen of the guards—"

"Precisely the three men we are seeking, perhaps." The officer turned to the corner table. "Gentlemen, your pardon! I am searching for, imprimis, a man in his shirt who has wounded an honest bourgeois and killed two lackeys—"

The hook-nosed guardsman broke into a guffaw.

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"With his shirt or with his teeth, M. de Moray? We all have shirts, thanks be to the saints! If your man had nothing on but a shirt, he is obviously not present."

"Ah!" The officer peered at the speaker. "You, M. Savinien de Cyrano!"

"Plus de Bergerac," said the Gascon easily. "I don't like the name of de Cyrano—it's not poetical, doesn't trip in the right meter to suit me. Also, the names of Alexandre Savinien—don't they hold an Italian touch to your ear, M. de Moray? Plain Cyrano de Bergerac, now, goes much better. Don't forget the de Bergerac, my dear lieutenant!"

"I shan't forget it," said the officer of police drily. "You're no doubt aware that duels are prohibited?"

"I should be!" Cyrano stretched out his long legs and laughed. "M. de Casteljaloux threatens to expel me from his company if I have any more!"

"Some moments ago," said M. de Moray, "we came upon a gentleman of the guards, dead. His sword was out, and so was his life. He was pinked in the throat, and it appears to have been your signature, my dear M. Savinien."

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"De Bergerac," added the Gascon whimsically.
"De Bergerac, I beg of you!"

"And the footsteps in the snow brought us here."

"Eh?" Cyrano opened his eyes widely. "Were they my footsteps, then? Because I am here at dinner, and you found footsteps in the snow—come, my dear Moray, do not be absurd!"

The officer bit his lip.

"Hm!" he said, staring at the shadowy figure.
"Who's this other gentleman? Perhaps it was he whose footsteps also led thither! Perhaps it was he who killed M. Bernard of the Cardinal's household on the Pont de Notre Dame, not long since!"

"Perhaps, perhaps not," rejoined the first man.
"Are you following men or footsteps, monsieur? If you want footsteps, you're entirely welcome. If you want me, that's another matter entirely. You've not connected me with any crime."

M. de Moray was furious at this pleasantry.
"Lanterns, here!" he ordered. "We'll see with whom we're dealing—"

D'Artagnan rose. For all his late terror, despite his gangling youth, he was now coolness itself as he intervened and drew all attention upon himself.

"We are not hiding ourselves, my dear sir," he

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said. "I am M. d'Artagnan, cadet in the company of M. des Essarts. Do I understand, m'sieu, that you suspect me of having killed a man on the Notre Dame bridge, another gentleman in the street, and of parading naked? Come! As to the last charge, you can see for yourself that I'm not naked. Of the other two matters, I know nothing, upon my word of honor! I am dining here with friends."

M. de Moray was far from perceiving the piercing shrewdness of this young man, whose air of patent honesty and provincial simplicity cleared away the atmosphere of suspicion as by magic. The officer bowed.

"Perhaps we have been hasty. M. Savinien I know, but you, M. d'Artagnan—"

"I am easily known," said d'Artagnan with a certain pride. "My brother is lieutenant in the company of Persan; another brother is in the Musketeers; my uncle bore the same name in the same regiment, with some honor. You can see for yourself, m'sieu, that we three have been here for some time, dining, and naturally could know nothing of what was passing outside."

The baffled officer turned again to the shadowy figure of the first man.

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"And you, monsieur? I do not recall your face."

The first man rose. He showed himself tall, gray-eyed, young, of an extreme and even startling pallor. The severity of his features hinted at suffering, but was lightened by the laugh in his eyes. His garments were astonishingly ragged and patched.

"I arrived in Paris only recently," he said. "I am on my way to Jerusalem to visit the Holy Land, and have been away from Paris for some time—"

"In which case you undoubtedly have a passport," suggested the officer.

"Here it is."

He extended the vellum document, and watched the officer open and decipher it.

His manner was poised, very tense and wary, his gray eyes narrowly alert; his whole air betrayed uncertainty as to the reception of this document. Cyrano perceived this, laughed a little, and kicked out. The first man caught the hint and relaxed slightly.

At this instant two other men, both rather small in build, entered the tavern and crossed to a table opposite. They were hatted, cloaked, faces muffled in scarves. They took chairs and ordered wine.

"Ah! M. Nicolas Vaugon—under the seal of His

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Majesty in person!" exclaimed the officer as he read the document.

At these words, the two newcomers turned and stared at the scene, then at each other, as though in blank astonishment. M. de Moray returned the passport to Vaugon, with a bow.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I regret to have disturbed your dinner, and I bid you goodnight. Eh? Two others here?"

He crossed to the two newcomers. One of them spoke in a low voice, and the officer recoiled. Then he collected himself, bowed deeply, turned, snapped an order at his men, and they all stamped out of the Pinecone.

"It seems that Paris is unsafe at night," said Vaugon, his voice shaky.

"Devilish unsafe for friends of His Eminence," amended Cyrano.

D'Artagnan looked at them and smiled. His eyes were singularly piercing and alert, but calculating. He bore an air of keen sagacity, despite his evident youth—an air quite impressive in its magnificent self-confidence. Now he seemed hugely amused at something.

"Your signature, M. de Bergerac—that was neatly

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said!" he observed in a low voice. "Lucky he did not notice the smear of fresh blood on your baldric, eh?"

Cyrano started, looked down hastily, and brought the edge of his cloak over his chest.

"You have sharp eyes—bah! To tell the truth, footwork in the snow was difficult, but it was a neat thrust. I'm glad to make your acquaintance, M. d'Artagnan—you stepped nimbly into the breach. This new style you are setting, of visiting friends in your shirt—it interests me!"

A flush came into d'Artagnan's face, a flash of swift anger into his eyes; then, before Cyrano's gay laugh, it died. He leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"I deserved the jest, perhaps," he acknowledged. "M. Vaugon, we both owe you thanks. Your dinner-party was an inspiration. You were both here when I entered, I think?"

Vaugon chuckled. "Yes. M. de Bergerac had just come in. I preceded him by a few minutes—coming from the Pont de Notre Dame."

D'Artagnan flung him a sharp look, then whistled. Cyrano brought up his flagon with a bellow of laughter. The confession was obvious.

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"Good! Excellent! I drink to better acquaintance, M. Vaugon!" he cried. "Look down upon us, spirits of the illustrious dead who haunt these beams! We drink to your laughter, my dear Rabelais—how you would love this scene! We drink to your benediction, Maître Villon—how I can fancy your ghostly chuckle as you listened! To M. Vaugon's health!"

"He needs it," said d'Artagnan, setting down his cup. Vaugon looked at him.

"What mean you?"

D'Artagnan shrugged. "If M. de Moray had regarded the remarkable red smear on the back of your passport, instead of studying its face—"

"You have sharp eyes," and Vaugon smiled. "So we confess our sins? Good. A stranger ran into me. He drew a dagger, flew at me, and paid for it. There's the exact truth. He dropped the passport and purse. I picked them up, having need of both. That's all."

"And enough. Dangerous truth, my friend!" said d'Artagnan. "It seems your stranger was M. Bernard of Richelieu's household—a little sub-secretary if I recall him aright. Well, M. Vaugon, you're with gentlemen; your confession is safe with us.

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At the same time," he added, "look out! By tomorrow, the Cardinal's spies will be searching all Paris for that passport and its bearer!"

The talk was guarded, since all three were aware of the newcomers across the room. Indeed, d'Artagnan was studying those two men with his quick, shrewd eye, as though despite cloaks and mufflings he found something familiar in them. Now Cyrano leaned forward and spoke half seriously, half whimsically.

"We are comrades, we three—each has saved the other this night, and himself as well. But me, I am a poet, therefore curious! My friend, I know the passport was not yours, so I have the imprudence to ask your name. I owe you a debt, to be paid some day."

"My name means nothing," said the stranger. "There is only one man in Paris to whom it would mean anything."

"And that man?" queried Cyrano with frank interest.

"Richelieu."

"Bah! Come, then!" Cyrano clapped his hand upon that of Vaugon. "If your name be that of Sathanas himself, I pledge you friendship! Regard

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our lucky triangle—here a poet, a guardsman, there a cadet of the guards, and a devilish shrewd one too. And here—”

“A Montmorenci,” said the stranger, smiling slightly.

At this name, Cyrano started. D’Artagnan’s alert gaze left the two men opposite and drove at Vaugon. Montmorenci! The great duke was dead and gone, a rebel, betrayed by his allies, sent to the scaffold by Richelieu, to whose stern grip all the princes of France had bent and broken in exile or death. But this—

“There are no Montmorencis,” said d’Artagnan under his breath.

“There are none—but there was one,” said Vaugon simply. “Two years ago he dwelt in England, unknown, his existence unsuspected, living with friends of his father. Agents of Richelieu tracked him down, seized him by night, kidnapped him, brought him to the Bastille. He had no friends, no money. His very name was unknown to the Governor of the Bastille. He was plunged into a dungeon and forgotten, left to die in the Basiniere itself, the worst hell in that pile of gray stone.”

Though scarce uttered above a whisper, these

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words held his two auditors transfixed. D'Artagnan was keenly tensed, Cyrano wide-eyed with interest.

"This man," continued Vaugon, bitterness in his pallid face, "had not plotted against the Cardinal. In the Bastille, he aspired to no vengeance. Yet he wanted freedom! He had only the clothes on his back, youth—and he wanted freedom."

"So!" Cyrano's avid imagination gulped at the truth. "Alone, unknown, friendless, without money, rotting in the Basiniere—by what miracle could this man encounter M. Bernard on the bridge of Notre Dame?"

"By using his head and a heaven-sent chance," said Vaugon, and smiled. There was a moment of tense silence, broken by the slow, crisp accents of d'Artagnan.

"Impossible! There has been no alarm. My friend, what you tell us is a sacred confidence—yet you relate the impossible. In the Bastille is a marshal of France, wealthy, powerful, with great friends; but he has been there ten years. If a Basompierre could not escape—"

"A lesser man might," said the stranger.

D'Artagnan shrugged, and his eyes wandered back

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to the two cloaked men opposite. Suddenly his mouth flew open. For an instant he seemed to recoil, as though appalled by a recognition of those men, or of one man only.

The others did not observe his consternation. From Cyrano broke a laugh, as he pressed the hand of Vaugon and then tipped his wine-cup over it.

"I baptize you Nicolas Vaugon!" he said merrily. "Being a philosopher, I believe in the impossible. Good—we are friends! You are a man to know."

"I am a man to shun," dissented the other. "This lucky passport saved me tonight; but tomorrow it might hang me, as M. d'Artagnan has pointed out. My company is dangerous. I have no name—my old one is dead with the past. I've no ambitions, having gained freedom. If I reached the King himself, what could I ask? Nothing. I don't want the peril of rank. I've no wealth to regain. Even His Majesty could not protect me against the Cardinal."

"He cannot protect himself against the Cardinal," said Cyrano drily, with all the worldly-wise cynicism of twenty-one years—most of them very dissipated years too.

The statement, however, was well founded. Louis the Just, as he was ironically termed, was old before

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his time, worn down by self-indulgence, weak in vice and heritage of vicious blood. It was not he who drove out the Medici, quelled the princes, coalesced France into a unity, enlarged her borders at the expense of Spain and Austria and Lorraine, but his minister. And this minister might himself be old, ravaged by disease, facing death daily—yet his strong grip on the sceptre of France could not be broken by the weaker man who wore the crown and lilies.

“When I got free in a workman’s place,” went on Vaugon reflectively, “when I set foot outside the Bastille, got shorn and shaved, walked away free, I swore to myself that the past was dead—that I’d take a new name and carve out a new future. And I’ll do it, if I must go to the Holy Land in the guise of this unknown Nicolas Vaugon!”

D’Artagnan took his fascinated gaze from the two strangers and looked at Vaugon, a certain youthful admiration in his eyes.

“From what I gather,” he said, “we’re all in the same boat, but you’re luckier than we are. Our friend here, obviously, was M. Savinien de Cyrano, and claps on a de Bergerac to make it sound better. I came to Paris a few months ago plain Charles de

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Batz-Castelmore, and took my uncle's name of Artagnan because it was fairly well known. Whereas, you have the royal warrant for your change of name! That is, if you can keep it. But we spoke of impossibilities. Don't you know that when a prisoner escapes from the Bastille, which upon my word is a rare thing, the alarm is given to all Paris? Don't you—you—"

Even while the words were upon his lips, the thick glass of the windows shook, as the dull boom of a cannon lifted heavily over the city. There was an instant's silence, and Vaugon smiled. D'Artagnan leaned back and waved his hand.

"Eh, then! I apologize for my lack of faith." He started suddenly, as though remembering something. "Those two men opposite—they've recognized you, Vaugon!"

Vaugon laughed carelessly and lifted his flagon.

"I return your own word—it's utterly impossible, my dear M. d'Artagnan! Not even Richelieu knows my face! Only the dull, half-witted jailer has ever looked in on me."

"But devil take it, I've been watching them, and they're talking about you!" snapped d'Artagnan, his voice urgent. "The man facing this way—I've

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seen him often enough at the Palais Cardinal. He's Mazarin, the confidential secretary of Richelieu, the Italian abbé! You'd best get out of here at once—"

"Too late," broke in Cyrano coolly. "On guard, now! M. Vaugon has saved us—we must, if necessary, save him."

He fell silent. One of the two strangers was crossing to their table, and now halted and bowed, disclosing his features. He was no other than M. de Carbon de Casteljaloux, in whose company Cyrano served.

"Your pardon, gentlemen. Ah, M. de Bergerac!"

"Good evening, my dear M. de Carbon," said Cyrano. "You seek me?"

"Not at all. I hesitate to intrude, messieurs, but we have come here to meet a certain M. Vaugon, and are somewhat pressed for time. May I ask whether he is of your company?"

Vaugon rose. "I am he, monsieur."

"Then, if these gentlemen will excuse you for a little, will you speak with us? No doubt you comprehend the exigency of the case."

"Most assuredly," said Vaugon, with a dry smile. "By your leave, my friends."

He accompanied his guide to the other table, un-

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hurried, unruffled. D'Artagnan looked after him admiringly.

"There goes a man, Bergerac! And in the spider's web."

Cyrano frowned assent and bent a dark gaze upon Mazarin, the aide and shadow of the great minister. M. de Bergerac disliked Italians, and detested this particular Italian very bitterly.

CHAPTER II

TO Nicholas Vaugon, as he now was, the brief half-minute as he crossed to the other table and seated himself was stretched into a mental hour. Every faculty was on the alert; he could not comprehend the situation in the least.

He knew that Jules de Mazarin had been Guilio Mazarini, was an Italian abbé, and was Richelieu's confidential secretary and right-hand man. Mazarin kept his face cloaked, but his eyes were sharp and brilliant, his voice was soft and lisping, strongly tinged with an Italian accent.

"You are Nicolas Vaugon, m'sou?" he asked.
"May I see your passport?"

"Certainly, M. de Mazarin," said Vaugon. The other started slightly.

"You know me?"

Vaugon gave him a glance of surprise. "Did you not come here to meet me?"

"Ah!" Mazarin took the vellum and nodded.
"I see M'sou Bernard was indiscreet."

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Vaugon smiled to himself. More indiscreet than this Italian knew! But what the devil was it all about? Did it lead back to the Bastille or ahead—to safety?

"Your real name, m'sou?" asked Mazarin, returning the passport.

"I have no other. It is here," said Vaugon at a venture, and tapped the document. To his relief, Mazarin seemed much pleased by the response.

"Admirable! How much, then, did Bernard tell you?"

Vaugon thought rapidly. Pitched into this affair by sheer force of chance, he was at least furnished with an identity. Mazarin had entered the Pinecone too late to learn from the watch that Bernard was dead. Therefore, only a fool would fail to seize the opportunity—and calculate later whither it might lead!

Settling himself comfortably in his chair, Vaugon determined to see the business through. He was conscious of Mazarin's scrutiny, but did not fear it. In the very shadow of the Bastille, he had obtained haircut and shave, and even his jailer might fail to recognize him now.

"M. Bernard," he replied, "told me almost noth-

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ing. I met him just this side the bridge of Notre Dame. He had been seeking me vainly, was hurried and in a bad temper. He gave me the passport——”

“And the purse?” said Mazarin anxiously.

“And the purse,” echoed Vaugon. The other sighed and gestured him to continue. Mazarin, who had hoarded the hugest treasure in France even while under the eagle eye of Richelieu, would far sooner lose a regiment of men than a purse of gold pieces.

“It seems that Bernard was embroiled with some gentleman,” pursued Vaugon coolly, knowing himself momentarily safe, “who was awaiting him at one side. He gave me the passport and purse, said to hurry here and meet you, no more. I offered him my services with the other man, even gave him my sword, as he had none, but he insisted that I come here at once.”

“You left M’sou Bernard fighting?” asked Mazarin.

“About to fight, at least.”

“Well, well, he accomplished his errand! That’s the main thing. So you know nothing further?”

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"Nothing, except that I have assumed the identity of a M. Vaugon——"

"Who does not exist." The guards officer had remained at the other table. Mazarin spoke slowly, picking his words, uttering them softly and lispingly, almost under his breath.

"I have need of a gentleman. He must be unknown in Paris, unknown in the whole Ile de France. He must be devoted to His Majesty's service. He must obey orders without question. He must be unmarried, a swordsman, willing to stake the future on the present. Such a man is not easy to find."

"Especially one devoted to the service of His Majesty," said Vaugon, with a faint emphasis on the final words. Mazarin caught the point and smiled.

"Yes. We do not seek a Cardinalist. M'sou Bernard knew exactly the man, arrived only today from Normandy. He answered for this gentleman and undertook to bring him here to meet me. The passport has been awaiting the man for some time. M'sou Bernard was indiscreet to hand over the passport and purse and to use my name——"

"He was pressed for time," said Vaugon drily.

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"No matter. You are the man?"

"I am Nicolas Vaugon. Everything else is forgotten, except that I serve His Majesty."

Again the slight emphasis. Mazarin tapped the table with swarthy, delicate fingers. He was by far the craftiest man in all Europe, this little Italian, destined to possess not only the power of Richelieu, but the woman Richelieu loved and could never win—Anne of Austria.

"Give me the passport again."

Vaugon produced it. The other opened and read snatches of the document aloud.

"You haven't read it carefully? 'To all our lieutenants, generals, governors, and so forth—our friend Nicolas Vaugon—going to Jerusalem—let him pass freely, safely, with his horse, money and so forth—cause him no trouble, but lend him aid and help if he has need—such is our pleasure.' And the signature of His Majesty. Does it not strike you, my dear M'sou Vaugon, that this is really an exceptional sort of document, giving the bearer liberal and even dangerous powers?"

The lisping voice drove in. Behind the accent, behind the sleekness, Vaugon sensed hard steel.

"Undoubtedly," he responded. "Why should

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such a passport be given poor Nicolas Vaugon, a humble bourgeois of Paris?"

Mazarin returned the document. "It will repay more careful perusal. And——"

"A moment," interposed Vaugon. "I'll be frank with you, M. de Mazarin. I don't care to serve you, or His Eminence, under a borrowed name. I don't care to enter into some intrigue of state that might lead honest if misguided men to the Bastille. I am neither for nor against His Eminence. I am solely for the King of France, whom, as a noble, I hold to be my master, and whose orders I shall obey with the utmost gladness. Is that clear?"

Mazarin quietly took from his pocket a folded bit of vellum and extended it. Vaugon opened it to see the same signature as that on his passport. He read:

"Let this assure M. Vaugon that under this name he will receive commands direct from my own lips. The affair ended, he may ask of me whatever a gentleman might ask from the first gentleman of France.

LOUIS."

With no trace of his real bewilderment, Vaugon returned the vellum.

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"I am satisfied, naturally," he said, and smiled. "You'll pardon my seeming rudeness? I know nothing of politics, and did not want to be embroiled—"

Mazarin dismissed the apology with a wave of his slender fingers.

"Understood, my dear sir," he purred. "You are to serve His Majesty in a matter requiring great delicacy, finesse, and perhaps skill at arms. You were chosen for exactly these qualities. Do you know those gentlemen at the table yonder?"

"I saw them for the first time half an hour ago, when I entered here."

"Very well. You accept the commission?"

"I accept," said Vaugon, and the die was cast.

"Good. You will accomplish the matter as you see best; you are held responsible only for the result. At ten tomorrow morning go to the auberge of the Cloche, in Rue Ci-Git-Le-Coeur. There a horse and equipment will be awaiting your call. Mount the horse, go to the convent of the Carmelites, ask for Madame Thérèse, and preform the commission she will give you from her own lips."

"Eh?" Vaugon looked up, astonished, as Mazarin rose. "That's all?"

"All, my dear M'sou Vaugon. And upon my

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word, you'll find it quite enough. I bid you good-night, and the best of luck. To our next meeting!"

Mazarin flung a word at the captain of guards. The latter joined him, and the two men passed out into the night.

Vaugon returned to the other table, sat down, and attacked his scarcely tasted food. He was hungry and thirsty, the crisis was past, and his first duty was to the inner man. To the eager queries of Cyrano, the sharp inquiring glances of d'Artagnan, he gave out his story in snatches. Presently they had it all. The host re-entered with more wine. By ones and twos, other men drifted in, until the old tavern was noisy with tongues. The three in their corner remained deaf to all around, and made away with dinner.

Vaugon at length handed the passport to d'Artagnan, and sipped at his wine. He did not know what to make of the affair, and said as much.

"However, I'm in for it," he concluded with a laugh. "And why not?"

"Mordious!" swore Cyrano. "My friend, you've trusted us this night with secrets!"

"Why not?" The gray eyes of Vaugon met the dark ones. "You're men to trust, and well met!"

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"And well matched—well matched!" exclaimed Cyrano delightedly, his hand smiting the shoulder of Vaugon in a hearty gesture. "Today I got a leave of three weeks—shall we go together on this adventure of mystery?"

"Gladly!" returned Vaugon. "But remember—the bottom may fall out of things at any moment! Bernard's friend is in Paris, and may have known he was to be called upon. There's quite a loophole. Besides, they'll be searching everywhere for me."

"Not for Vaugon—a man who does not exist!" broke in d'Artagnan, with a short laugh. "Bah! With this paper you could snap your fingers at the Cardinal and all his men! It's the most extraordinary thing I ever saw. If I didn't have it here under my eyes, with His Majesty's fist to it, I'd call it a forgery! Look here, now——"

All three leaned over the table, as d'Artagnan's finger pointed to the phrases on which he paused.

"Here Vaugon is called a bourgeois—farther on, it's *Sieur Nicolas Vaugon*! There's an anomaly for you, obviously intentional. '— to pass freely with his horse, etc., under the protection of every existing power.' Death of my life! What are you—a prince in disguise?"

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"Certainly," broke in Cyrano with a chuckle. "The Montmorencis are princes—that's why their power was smashed."

"Bah! Pay attention to this," snapped d'Artagnan. "Since when was a bourgeois of Paris called 'Sieur'—eh? Look! 'Without troubling him nor giving him hindrance, nor allowing him to be given hindrance, and so forth, but lending him all aid, favor and assistance if required.' Ask and it shall be given to you, in the King's name! This is no ordinary formula of words. It's an absolute grant of free passage anywhere, with power to call upon any troops or officers of the realm as you may need. Name of the devil, somebody's gone mad!"

And d'Artagnan flung down the document with a stupefied air. Vaugon pocketed it and nodded.

"Mazarin said it would repay another reading," he said drily.

"It'll pay you to look to your head," said d'Artagnan, and rose. He held out a hand to each, and a smile warmed the sharp austerity of his face. "I'm off, my friends—on duty tonight. My lodgings are in the Rue des Vieux Colombiers, near the Musketeers' barracks; I shall be most happy to see either or both of you at any time. I fear, though,

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our Sieur Vaugon won't come back to Paris once he's out of it."

"Bah! Why not?" said Vaugon, and laughed as he shook hands. "We'll meet again!"

D'Artagnan nodded and was gone. Cyrano gazed after him reflectively.

"Hm! That man dislikes me," he said. "Why, I don't know. I feel it. And he's a bit shrewd for my taste—most devilish shrewd! Well, comrade, let's finish our dinner, open another bottle, and you'll come home with me for the night."

Vaugon assented gladly.

He was safe enough for the moment, yet his situation was appalling in its potential danger. At twelve years of age he had been spirited out of France, supposedly dead of the plague; in reality, he lived between Flanders and England with certain friends of the Montmorenci family who alone knew his secret. At twenty, he had been as mysteriously spirited back to France and into the Bastille.

Today, his face was unknown to any save his jailer. He had nothing to win back, nothing to seek; he was a man without a past. In the space of an hour's time he had seized the forelock of

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destiny, had found freedom, friends, a name, a mission, a future—and a king's promise!

He was abruptly aware of the dark, powerful features of Cyrano thrust across the table toward him, while the long arms plied bottle and cup.

"Ha! Richelieu did not sign that passport!" exclaimed the guardsman in a low voice, and winked. "This secret meeting with Mazarin, too—you comprehend?"

"I comprehend nothing," said Vaugon simply. "I know almost nothing of politics. My friend, I'm bewildered as a child!"

Cyrano laughed. "The king hates his minister bitterly, fears him even more bitterly. Sly Mazarin knows that both king and minister will soon be dead—he gambles Richelieu will die first. You see? Here's some intrigue the king is fostering, be sure of it! Tonight you fought one of the Cardinal's household—tomorrow, you fight for the king against the Cardinal himself!"

"Eh? You think so?"

"I'm sure of it," said Cyrano with conviction. "You're playing the king's game—not you alone, but both of us together, eh? And the convent of

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the Carmelites, ha! Great ladies, those Carmelites, of the noblest families——”

Vaugon gestured caution. A man was coming to their table, a guardsman, as his scarf testified. He swaggered up, clapped Cyrano on the shoulder, laughed a greeting.

“At your tricks again, Alexandre?”

“Tut, tut—it’s Bergerac!” said Cyrano. “How goes it, my dear Cuigy?”

“Fairly. Come, tell me something! I hear Prieux of the guards was found tonight near the Magdaleine, run through the throat. Well, what was the rhyme? Repeat it!”

Cyrano shrugged. “It was too cursed cold for rhyming. I warned him against the third riposte, and he disregarded the warning. That’s all.”

The other chuckled and went swaggering on his way.

“How many names have you?” demanded Vaugon whimsically.

“I’m concentrating on one now. Mordious! You take me for a Gascon?”

“Of course.”

Cyrano grinned, glanced around, then preened his mustache and spoke softly.

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"Confidences! You've made yourself a pilgrim, I've made myself a Gascon. Why? I was born here in Paris; my grand-dad was a fish merchant to start with, and turned himself into a royal secretary and a rich man. True, we have some right to the name of Bergerac; that is, my grandsire bought a seigneurie of that name——"

He chuckled, regarding a gold seal-ring on his finger. Vaugon studied him curiously.

"But why the Gascon? You don't seem a man of pretense."

"Bah! I'm a dreamer, and I like to fool these fools. Why the Gascon? Because nobody can succeed in the army unless he's a Gascon; the whole cursed countryside flocked to Paris with Henri Quatre, and are here yet. Look at the guards' companies—four out of every five are commanded by Gascons! And the ranks are almost solidly Gascon. I chose the army as a career, therefore had to become a Gascon. And I flatter myself that I did a good job of it."

"You did," agreed Vaugon. "But you mentioned that d'Artagnan dislikes you. Why? I did not notice it."

Cyrano shrugged. "I sensed it. Perhaps be-

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cause his shrewd brain told him that I'm not a real Gascon. Well, no matter! It's a good thing I'm leaving Paris with you—as you see, they all blame me for killing Prieux tonight. Are you ready? I've no desire to be critical, my friend, but those garments of yours aren't exactly modish."

"They're two years old," said Vaugon.

"I'll fit you out—we're of a size. No protests! I won forty louis this afternoon and paid my tailor's bill. I've laid in a large wardrobe, I've a decent horse, and what better than to share with a comrade? Your star may lead me to fortune—here's a health to the unknown lady who awaits us at the Carmelites!"

He drank. Vaugon noticed the seal-ring on his finger, and touched it.

"Come, Cyrano, more confidence! You puzzle me. Are you joking, with your talk of a fish merchant? You wouldn't carry these arms unless——"

Cyrano grimaced.

"Pretense! Folly! Mockery of fools!" he exclaimed, shoving back his chair. "Comrade, all Paris is a hollow sham, and I'm like the others. Being the man I am, I don't hesitate to admit it to myself or to a friend like you. I trust you, be-

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cause you've trusted me. Noble? Bah! If the royal commissaires ever dropped on me for false assumption of nobility, they'd nail me like a shot! What matter? I ruffle it with the others, put on a bold front, and chuckle at the fools who are taken in. They don't laugh at me, however. They've learned it doesn't pay to laugh at Hercule Alexandre Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, by the gods! Come along before I get too drunk to find the way home——"

The imitation Gascon's nimble tongue talked them out into the cold street, and they went their way together.

CHAPTER III

TOWARD ten the next morning, Cyrano and Vaugon crossed the bridge of Notre Dame. The guardsmen who mounted, Vaugon was afoot. They turned their steps toward the little street to the right. The day was crisp, sunny, bracing, with flurries of snow on the stones; both men had need of their cloaks. Reaching the end of Rue Ci-Git-le-Coeur, Cyrano drew rein.

"I will wait here," he said. "Two had best not come where one is expected. A sentimental note, this!"

"Sentimental?" Vaugon looked up at him inquiringly. Cyrano waved his hand.

"That house on the left—you see? Beyond the auberge. There our noble King Francis built for one of his ladies, hence the name—Here Lies The Heart! A good omen, my friend. I foresee pretty things ahead."

"Bah!" said Vaugon, and with a shrug headed up the short, narrow street.

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The tavern of the Cloche showed on his left, and he turned in at the courtyard. Two grooms were saddling a splendid black horse. Looking on was a man whose white-plumed beaver proclaimed him a soldier, whose costly garb and noble air proclaimed him some great man. He turned, and Vaugon saluted him.

"A magnificent horse, monsieur! May I ask to whom he belongs?"

"To a gentleman, monsieur, named Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

The words were given significance by a steady look. Vaugon nodded to it.

"I am he. Do you wish to see my passport?"

"No, monsieur. Tell me simply whither you ride."

"To the Carmelites."

The other smiled. "Enough. I see you have no sword—will you honor me by accepting mine? There are pistols at the saddle, yet one finds a sword handy. When through with the horse, return it here—also the sword, which is more important than the horse."

Vaugon bowed. The cavalier removed a very handsome baldric and sword from his shoulder and

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handed it to Vaugon, then turned and disappeared in the auberge without awaiting thanks.

Donning the baldric, Vaugon fastened his cloak again, mounted, and headed the black out into the street. When he regained the quay and his companion, Cyrano regarded him with a stare and a laugh.

"Horse, pistols, a sword! Excellent. Ahead, a lady awaits us. Better yet! I knew this would prove interesting. Forward to the Barrier St. Jacques!"

"I've thought of something," said Vaugon, as they rode together. "Your theory of last night—remember? If it were correct, then why should a man of the Cardinal's household have taken the passport and money to Vaugon?"

Cyrano shrugged. "Why did he attack you so hastily? There's the answer. He was serving Mazarin rather than his red eminence. He thought you were spying on him. You see? That wily little Italian devil has undermined half Paris, let me tell you! Well, never mind the past. Look to the future! Richelieu's spies are thick, and if he hasn't got wind of his business, whatever it is, then I'm much mistaken. He'll hear about your passport, too.

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Are you determined to go through with the errand—or take to your heels and regain England?"

Vaugon did not respond at once, and Cyrano regarded him curiously, half in liking, half in frowning wonder. In repose this gray-eyed face, older than its years, bore a certain inflexible severity; one does not lie in prison two years, with one single fixed purpose in mind, and not show the traces. Yet in relaxation, this same face was swept into something of the Gascon's reckless youth, with a merry, level-eyed smile that could be winning enough.

Behind all this, Cyrano sensed in the man a certain odd disregard of others, a queer self-sufficiency, almost selfishness. He liked the man, but he did not like this indefinable something. And he was to remember it in later days.

"Through with it!" said Vaugon abruptly, decisively. "I've won freedom—now I serve His Majesty and win a future. I'll win it!"

"We'll win it," corrected Cyrano gaily.

Passing Port Royal and the fields beyond, they came to the barrier of the Faubourg St. Jacques, where the massive gray walls and buildings of several convents and monasteries rose ahead. One of the guards halted them.

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"Service of the king," said Vaugon. "Call your officer."

The officer came from the guard-house, opened the passport Vaugon presented, read it wide-eyed, and doffed his beaver respectfully.

"Pass, service of the king!" he said. To the salute of the guards, the two rode on into the Rue de St. Jacques.

When they came to the corner of the Rue d'Enfer, a man on horseback pushed out ahead of them, hand on sword, barring the way. It was no other than Carbon de Casteljaloux, in whose company Cyrano served—the same who had accompanied Mazarin to the Pinecone. A keen-eyed, stalwart, swarthy Gascon.

"Ah!" said Cyrano, drawing ahead. "Good morning, my worthy commander! I left you last night at the Pinecone, I find you today in St. Jacques! Why this lonely promenade in a street of friars?"

The other put forth his hand to that of Cyrano. He shot a look at Vaugon, and must have recognized him.

"I thought you on leave, M. de Bergerac?" he said.

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"Precisely," said Cyrano. "On His Majesty's business, my dear captain. Do I understand you are halting us?"

"I am," said the officer drily. "This is no place for a duel, let me warn you. Her Majesty the Queen is in retreat at the Carmelites since yesterday. I am in charge of——"

"Good, good—then we go to the Carmelites," broke in Cyrano. "The passport, M. Vaugon!"

The officer stared. "Cadédis! Are you jesting, my good Savinien?"

"I jest with this, my good Casteljaloux!" and Cyrano, taking the passport from Vaugon, extended it.

The officer saluted stiffly. "Good. Pass. Go to the devil if you like! That is to say, go to the post-ern gate in the Rue de la Bourbe."

"We accept your advice," replied Cyrano. The other halted him.

"One moment! In regard to a gentleman of the guards found dead near the Magdaleine last night, and another gentleman found on the Pont de Notre Dame——"

"Too late, my dear captain!" Cyrano chuckled. "If you'd come to the Pinecone a bit earlier last

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night, you would have seen that M. de Moray did me the honor of questioning me. He appeared quite satisfied that I had nothing to do with either unhappy demise."

The officer chuckled, returned the salute of Vaugon, and motioned them to pass.

The two rode on, Cyrano leading the way down the Rue d'Enfer, where high garden walls rose on either hand. They turned into the Rue de la Bourbe, and midway of these walls saw a small gate, surmounted by a cross, outside which a musketeer stood on guard. Cyrano swung from the saddle and knocked, tugged at the bell-pull, and nodded to the guardsman.

"Will you watch our horses, comrade? Good. Come on, Vaugon."

The little port in the gate swung back, and a nun's face looked through the grill.

"Sieur Nicolas Vaugon and a companion," said Cyrano. "To see Madame Thérèse, by appointment."

The gate was opened in silence. The two men stepped in, and found themselves in the snow-touched gardens of the convent. Their wordless guide beckoned them on across the bleak garden

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to the building on the right, and through a doorway into an austere hall. Here the nun swung open a door, showing a reception room that was anything but gay.

"Wait," she said, and departed.

Vaugon looked around the room, met the disgusted gaze of his companion, and smiled.

"What did you expect—beauty in a convent?"

The other made a gesture and went to the window, staring out on the garden.

"Come here," he said suddenly. Vaugon strode to his side. "Do you know that man?"

"No."

From a door in the building opposite this one, a man was leaving, leisurely crossing the garden toward the gate, fastening a furred cloak as he went. He was richly dressed in blue velvet pointed with gold; a blue plume adorned his beaver, and his cloak was of the same hue. Riding boots and gauntlets betokened the traveler. Cyrano watched the gallant pass with a shadowy frown darkening his face, then turned.

"Comte de Fleury, a relative of the Duchesse d'Aiguillon—who happens to be the niece of the red

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cardinal. Fleury is an ambitious man, a tremendous gambler, a soldier of some distinction——”

“Whom you don’t love, by the tone of your praise.”

“Each one to his taste!” said Cyrano. “He’s handsome, popular, able, sure to get on in the world. I’m envious.”

“Envious? You?” Vaugon clapped him on the shoulder. “Bah! When you’re bitten with envy, the sun will spill rain—eh? What’s the matter?”

The imitation Gascon put out a hand and pushed Vaugon away. His jaw had dropped, his eyes were widening in blank amaze. Such utter stupefaction was printed on his face that Vaugon turned to follow his gaze, and saw a woman who had entered the room and was coming toward them. She was plainly dressed, and though in middle age, was extremely beautiful.

An incredible suspicion seized upon Vaugon. It was confirmed when Cyrano took a step forward, dropped to his knee, and kissed the hand Anne of Austria extended to him.

“Your Majesty!” stammered the guardsman, for once utterly at a loss.

“You are M. Vaugon?” asked the queen.

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"I am M. de Bergerac, of the guards, Your Majesty. My companion is Sieur Vaugon."

Vaugon came to his knee, touched his lips to the queen's fingers, and looked up to see startled hesitation in her eyes. He divined its cause, and spoke.

"Your Majesty, I am Nicholas Vaugon. I know little of Paris, but am fortunate in a friend who is a better man than I. When he offered to accompany me in this unknown errand, I accepted with joy. He asks only to serve Your Majesty. Should you wish him to retire——"

"No, no," said the queen, and smiled a little. "I have heard of M. de Bergerac, and I know I have no more devoted servant. You did not know you were to see me?"

"I undertook this errand in the service of the king," said Vaugon. "Since it is also in the service of Your Majesty—could any man ask more?"

Meeting his quick gray eyes, his warm smile, the queen's hesitancy fled.

"Your name, monsieur?"

"I have none other than that on my passport, Your Majesty. It has been given me by the king—therefore I shall keep it, and it alone."

She laughed softly at this. "Courtier! But no—

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you speak in earnest. Are there such men, then? Well—time presses. You know of your errand?"

"I know only that I was to come at this hour, ask for Madame Thérèse, and do what she told me to do. Nothing else."

The queen's gaze widened slightly, searched his face, read truth there, and then she relaxed.

"Well—do you know the country south of Paris? The Forest of Esugny?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"One follows the Orleans road to Lonjumeau, from there the paved road to Ste. Genevieve des Bois, a matter of six to seven leagues. Half a league from Ste. Genevieve, on the forested heights above the Orge, is the Chateau de Closset—property of Mlle. de Closset, ward of the king. Can you find the place?"

Cyrano made a gesture of assurance, and Vaugon assented silently.

"What day is this—Thursday? On Saturday, Mlle. de Closset enters into contract of marriage with a gentleman. She does not wish it. I do not wish it. The king himself does not wish it. Yet, for certain reasons of state, or rather of policy——"

The queen checked herself—bitterness was in her

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voice, and she had nearly said too much. A slight flush of anger was mounting her white cheeks. Vaugon could easily enough finish her sentence. What anyone else in France did or did not wish, mattered nothing, if Richelieu wished it.

"Your Majesty desires this marriage prevented?" asked Vaugon quietly.

"The king has promised Mlle. de Closset that it will be prevented."

Vaugon rose and bowed. "Easily enough done, then. If Your Majesty will confide to me the name of the gentleman in question——"

"Stop!" exclaimed the queen imperiously. "Not in that fashion, monsieur. Certain plans have been made. You were given your passport for a purpose, and that purpose is to take Mlle. de Closset away with you."

Vaugon smiled. "To the Holy Land, Your Majesty?"

"Where you like. She expects you, and you will give her this ring in token." Into Vaugon's hand the queen dropped a small circlet of gold. "The way, the means, the road—these are for you to say, as she will be in your charge. Sieur Nicolas Vaugon is presumed to have certain qualities placing him, in

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respect to this lady, in the position of His Majesty himself."

It was graciously said. Cyrano's ironic eye suggested that the position of His Majesty toward the young ladies of honor was not altogether what it might have been, but Vaugon was not watching his companion.

"Your Majesty shall not be disappointed," he rejoined. "May I point out that evasion is one thing—the prevention of the marriage quite another thing?"

"In this case, time fights for us—evasion is prevention," said the queen, a flash in her eye. She was fighting the red minister with his own weapons, now. "After the fifteenth of December you may bring Mlle. de Closset openly to me at the Louvre—but not until that date."

"On the sixteenth of December, Your Majesty, she comes to the Louvre."

"I can give you no reward, gentlemen, except my thanks," and the queen extended her hand. Vaugon went to his knee.

"That, Your Majesty, is the greatest reward we could possibly ask," he said quietly.

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The queen smiled, gave her hand to Cyrano, and departed.

The silent nun appeared and beckoned, led them out and across the garden to the gate, and closed it behind them. As Vaugon was mounting, Cyrano paused for a word with the musketeer there.

"Mon vieux, some ten minutes ago a very fine gentleman came out this way. I perceive you belong to the company of Treville—hence you may be aware that while the gentleman was outwardly garbed in blue, he might better have been dressed in red."

A Gascon like most of his company, the musketeer caught the allusion and chuckled.

"We're all good Cardinalists, M. de Bergerac," he returned. "Aye. Your friend was met by two other men, with horses. They spoke of taking the Orleans road. One of them asked about your horses, but I gave them no information. Eh?"

"Thanks, comrade!" exclaimed Cyrano, and climbed into the saddle.

For a space the two companions rode in silence, Cyrano leading the way for the Barrier d'Enfer and the highway leading south to Orleans. Then the pseudo-Gascon broke out.

"We'll save the horses—a splendid animal, that

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of yours! Eh, comrade? You're cursed thoughtful. What about?"

Vaugon looked at him. "If they wanted to hide the girl for two or three weeks, why not put her into some convent?"

"What good? M. Duplessis is a cardinal. Convents are no bar to him."

"True. But she did not mention the cardinal."

Cyrano laughed at this. "No! For a wonder, and it's no less than a miracle, here the king and queen are working together. Both suspect and fear each other, yet both hate His Eminence; here, for once, they combine. Now, I've heard of this Mlle. de Closset—she's a great heiress, and said to be a trifle crack-brained, queer, wrong in the head. Richelieu needed her money for his own purposes, and swung Their Majesties to his will. Under the surface, they've dared to rebel against him."

"Also," he added thoughtfully, "it happens that the girl is related to the Duchesse de Chevreuse, who's at present staying outside France for her health. She's Richelieu's arch-enemy, the queen's most intimate friend, and a devil for intrigue. There's a sweet business! The fact stands clear, comrade, that we're en route for great things!"

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Vaugon nodded. "I told you there was a future to be won. If we can carry off this girl and keep her safe for a fortnight or so——"

"Mordious! We must take her to the moon, then! Every Cardinalist spy in France will be out for us. And what the devil to do with a woman on the highway during a fortnight? And where to go with her?"

"Where we like," said Vaugon. "That is, providing we get away with her. If she's a fine court lady, we'll have a job on our hands. May have to get a coach for her."

Cyrano held out his hand.

"The ring she gave you—let's have a look at it."

Vaugon held out the ring, a circlet of plain gold, in which was carved the initial M and nothing else. Cyrano examined it, then returned it and whistled softly.

"Marie de Rohan, Duchesse de Chevreuse!" he ejaculated. "Perhaps, perhaps not—but what did I tell you, eh? Softly, now—the barrier——"

In five minutes they were past the gate, and on the route of the south. Then Cyrano uttered a joyous laugh and flung out his hand toward the horizon.

"All clear—except one thing!" he exclaimed.

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"Look, now! Richelieu and Chevreuse are bitter enemies. This girl is a relative of Chevreuse and the king's ward. Richelieu determines to marry her—to whom? There's the hidden thing, with its queer time element. Well, he forces the king to agree. Chevreuse somehow gets word to the queen—she has friends here, spies. For once queen and king join forces against Richelieu. What happens?

"The scent thickens. They work with Giulio Mazarini—ha! The Italian's too sharp for Richelieu. He never uses force, this Italian—he has brains! M. Bernard is drawn in, to supply the needed man. He, too, betrays Richelieu. Fate sends the man—you see? How did they get this passport secretly? Undoubtedly Cinq-Mars is in it somewhere. Since Richelieu installed him as Grand Equerry, he has become the king's favorite and has turned dead against Richelieu. They're all turning against the red minister. Well, no telling! The king signs this passport, and the game of destiny is set in motion. Result—you wear a ring Mlle. de Closset will recognize!"

Vaugon looked sharply at his companion.

"You mean—it's a conspiracy to crush Richelieu?"

"Crush Richelieu? Mordious!" Cyrano clapped

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his thigh delightedly. "While that man has breath in his body, all Europe can't crush him! No—it's a conspiracy to betray him. Let them look out, then! The old lion has claws. I hate Cardinalists, but I admire the cardinal. He's the best man in France today, bar none."

Vaugon shrugged. "After two years in the Bastille, I don't share your sentiment of admiration. Besides—why should Comte de Fleury, in all his court finery, be taking the Orleans road?"

"Ha!" The dark eyes of Cyrano gleamed suddenly. "Exactly! He's had heavy gambling losses of late, this same Fleury—ruinous losses! Why was he at the Carmelites? He had business here with someone. With whom? Spies, spies, spies—there's our man, Vaugon! There's our bridegroom! And the cardinal will learn soon enough that we had audience with the queen. Our business lies ahead with Fleury—spurs, comrade! Spurs and after him!"

The horses quickened their pace, broke into a gallop, went thundering down the paved wintry highway toward the south.

CHAPTER IV

UPON the evening of the day Vaugon and Cyrano quit Paris, it appeared that a number of people had business in the Rue Vaugirard, beside the gardens of the Luxembourg.

This was rather astonishing. Tonight all this quarter of palaces, of monasteries, of "hotels" belonging to great nobles, was dark and silent. Across the Seine, the Louvre shone with gaily as the king made court to La Fayette and his other mock mistresses, the while he planned more real debauchery with his favorite Cinq-Mars, the so-called Monsieur le Grand. The magnificent new Palais Cardinal, too, glittered with a less somber court, yet a greater one. If the king dwelt in the palace of the Louvre, the ruler of France dwelt in the palace just completed by the cardinal-duke, Richelieu.

Yet people came into the Rue Vaugirard, the narrow little street beside the Luxembourg, and others went. Folk of all classes, it seemed; soldiers, trades-

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men, bravos, even a woman or two, lackeys, monks. The really odd thing about it was that they all came and went by a small unlighted door in an unlighted house.

The door, however, gave entry into a central courtyard where a lantern showed an officer and guards. This house was the Hotel d'Aiguillon, belonging to Mme. de Combalet, Duchesse d'Aiguillon—the niece of Richelieu.

A man in black, looking as though he might be the laybrother of some religious order, came into the courtyard, passed the guards to the entry beyond, and gave his name to a lackey at a door there. He paid no heed to the assembly in the reception salon, but waited with eyes downcast until the lackey returned and gestured. He followed to a room on the floor above, where sat at a desk a gray-clad man, sharp-featured, cold-eyed, with grayish hair and goatee. This man was Léon de Bouthilier de Chavigny, Secretary of State.

The man in black came forward and stood humbly waiting until he was addressed.

"Your report?" said Chavigny, with his usual icy air.

"Excellency, two visitors today. They came about

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ten this morning, evidently by appointment. They asked at the postern gate for Mme. Thérèse, and were taken into the convent at once."

Chavigny laid down his quill. "Their names?"

"One was a M. de Bergerac, of the company of Casteljaloux. The other, a stranger."

"His name?"

"Vaugon. It was he who had the appointment. *Sieur Nicolas Vaugon.*"

"A soldier?"

"A young man, very grave, handsome, even distinguished. He is not of the court, and his face is unknown."

"He entered by the postern gate?"

"In *Rue de la Bourbe.*"

"Good. Continue."

"They remained for perhaps fifteen minutes. I learned that a certain person saw them in private. They departed, clad as though for a journey. They had excellent horses, and rode toward the *Barrier d'Enfer.*"

Chavigny fingered his grayish beard.

"Very well. Nothing else?"

"The report for the day regarding a certain person." And the spy laid a paper on the desk. At a

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gesture, he withdrew. Chavigny touched a bell, and a secretary entered.

"The officer who was on duty this morning at the Barrier d'Enfer. Send for him on the instant and bring him here to me."

The secretary bowed and withdrew. Chavigny glanced over the written report and tossed it aside, frowning. He looked up as another visitor entered, bowing to him.

"Ah! Good evening, M. de Moray! What developments in the cases of MM. Prieux and Bernard?"

"I regret to say, none," said M. de Moray. "My police——"

"It is of you I ask, not of your police," said Chavigny with glacial manner. "You made the discovery of the bodies in person, I believe. And you say no developments?"

The officer changed countenance. "M. Bernard was killed with his own dagger," he replied. "The snow was fresh. We traced footprints as far as Ste. Magdaleine, where they became lost. There we found M. Prieux, sword in hand—obviously a duel. It seemed that the footprints led on to the Pinecone Tavern, but we could not be certain. Also, there was a riot in the Rue d'Anvers. A man visiting his

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mistress was surprised by the husband. He fled in his shirt, killed two lackeys, wounded the husband—and escaped. His tracks also led toward the Pinecone, but were lost among others in the street.”

“His name?”

“Unknown. The woman knew him as Comte de Silly. No such person exists.”

“If he fled, his clothes remained.”

“The woman threw them into the street. They disappeared.”

“And no developments at the Pinecone?”

M. de Moray shrugged. “In the auberge were only three gentlemen at dinner—none was the naked man of the Rue d’Anvers. One was a gentleman of the guards, M. de Bergerac——”

“The most confirmed duellist in Paris!”

“He laughed at my questions,” and Moray flushed slightly. “Another was a cadet of the guards, one M. d’Artagnan, nephew of the former gentleman of that name. Young, but conveying a remarkable impression. He denied all knowledge and obviously spoke the truth. As he pointed out, all three of them had been dining there, and——”

“Three? Who was the third?”

“A stranger, one Sieur Vaugon.”

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Chavigny started. "Vaugon! A stranger? You're certain?"

"Bearer of a passport signed by His Majesty—an unusual thing, as you know," said Moray stiffly. At this instant a small, dark-clad man entered the room without a sound, advanced to the desk, and laid down some papers. Chavigny gave him a glance and a nod.

"In a moment, M. de Mazarin. Continue, M. de Moray. This *Sieur Vaugon*?"

"The passport was most emphatic," said Moray. "He was to be offered no hindrance, but to be given every aid he might demand. Before such sweeping orders——"

"You were helpless, naturally. Nor was there reason to arrest him. There was no one else in the place?"

The dark eyes of Mazarin rested upon the officer with singular intensity, and M. de Moray caught the look.

"There was no one else," he said.

"Very well, thank you. We shall look into it."

The officer bowed and withdrew. Chavigny turned to his other visitor.

"Well, M. de Mazarin?"

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"Monsieur," and Mazarin bowed with deference, "His Eminence requests that you bring him the report from Sedan as quickly as it arrives."

"In ten minutes at latest. It has but just arrived, and is being decoded."

Mazarin withdrew. Chavigny touched the bell and gave his secretary swift orders.

"A special passport was issued some time ago to one Sieur Vaugon. Send to the clerks of the seals in the morning and demand why no report was made of it. I wish to speak as quickly as possible with a cadet of the guards, a M. d'Artaignan of Artagnan."

"I think such a man is on duty tonight, here," said the secretary. "Let me go down and see."

In five minutes d'Artagnan entered the room. He had donned the scarf of blue and silver, the only vestige of a regular uniform yet known in the Guards; and while he lacked the cassock or cloak of a guardsman, he was proud enough of the uniform scarf.

"Monsieur," said Chavigny without preamble, "I believe you dined at the Pinecone Tavern last evening with a certain M. Vaugon. Will you kindly tell me what you know of him?"

"With pleasure, monsieur," said d'Artagnan

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coolly. If the gaze of Chavigny were icy, his own was poised and penetrating, unruffled. "When I entered the tavern, M. de Bergerac of the guards was there. He asked me to dine with him. A certain Sieur Vaugon was also his guest, so I met the gentleman for the first time in this way."

"Who is he? Where is he from?" demanded Chavigny brusquely.

"Unless the information is offered, monsieur, one gentleman does not ask these things of another."

It was sweetly said. Chavigny bit his lip, and a trace of color rose in his cheek.

"Then this Vaugon was a stranger to you?"

"An absolute stranger, monsieur."

From outside the curtained doorway, a shadow moved swiftly; it developed into the noiseless figure of Mazarin, slipping rapidly down a corridor. The wily Italian realized that unless he got ahead of Chavigny, whom he hated and feared, there would be questions to answer. He much preferred to make Chavigny do the answering to these questions.

He penetrated to a large chamber whose curtained windows overlooked the gardens of the Luxembourg. This room was dark, lighted only by the blazing fireplace and a pair of candelabra upon a

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table piled with papers. Writing at the table, sat a man in a vast pillow-heaped armchair—a man wrapped against the cold in furred mantle. On his head was a tiny scarlet skullcap. His hair was thin and gray. His high forehead, his imperious features, were drawn as though with slow unending pain; yet above the pain was stamped in them the sigil of an inflexible will. Gray mustache and chin-tuft enclosed thin, bitter lips which seemed incapable of smiling.

“Not arrived?” asked Richelieu, glancing up at Mazarin’s entry.

“In ten minutes, Monseigneur,” lisped Mazarin. “I have just been given a very curious report, which you might find of interest.”

Richelieu laid aside his quill and leaned back among the cushions, with a gesture of assent. Mazarin spoke softly, slowly. His abbé’s costume became him well; his face was sleek, swarthy, showing no emotion. His air was humble and deferential.

“A fortnight ago, Eminentissime Signor, a document was taken to the clerks of the seals by M. le Grand in person.”

Mazarin paused. At the name of Cinq-Mars, that intolerably ambitious young man whom he had raised

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to power as royal favorite, and who had turned against him, a slight shadow crossed the face of the cardinal-duke. Thanks to his haughty airs and his position of Grand Equerry, Cinq-Mars had been given the appellation of M. le Grand—partly in mockery.

"This document," continued Mazarin, "was a passport made out by M. le Grand and signed by His Majesty, in the name of Sieur Nicolas Vaugon, a gentleman of Paris. No such person exists. It seems M. Vaugon was granted rather exceptional powers in order that he might make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land."

Richelieu first looked faintly amused, then puzzled.

"Yes? To the Holy Land? And your information comes from——"

"A lady," said Mazarin, with a modest smirk. "The point is, Monseigneur, that one could very well go to Jerusalem by way of London, Madrid, Vienna or—Sedan."

At this word, a flash of lightning seemed to fill the eyes of Richelieu. He relaxed, thoughtful, silent. Mazarin said no more, but waited.

Richelieu was France. His hand alone had broken the power of the nobles and princes, slowly forming

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a strong central authority, making France an entity rather than a loosely-tied bundle of petty dukedoms. He paid for it with enemies, such as were left alive, for some men could not be brought to the scaffold. Chief of these was Monsieur, brother of the king, Duke of Orleans, arch-traitor, coward and rebel, the most dishonored gentleman of France, married to Margaret of Lorraine but just now residing in Paris much against his will.

Outside of Paris, outside France itself, were greater enemies. Duke Charles of Lorraine, allied with Austria against France; Bouillon; Comte de Soissons; and, looming far above all the petty men who bore these historic names, one woman, Marie de Rohan, Duchesse de Chevreuse, allied by her second marriage to the royal houses of England and Lorraine.

She, queen of beauty and debauchery, with neither scruples nor morals, fearing nothing, daring everything, alone had fought Richelieu these ten years and more, and alone had been able to menace the grip of that iron man. Within a few months she was to all but overturn France itself—only a quirk of destiny was to keep the enemy from Paris.

Soissons held Sedan for the Duc de Bouillon.

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This city, on the frontier, independent of France, was the rally-point for every enemy of Richelieu. For some time, Chevreuse had been in London, her adventurous career sadly hampered by poverty; the long fingers of Richelieu had reached her, holding her tightly if precariously by lack of funds. She was the only living person he feared, if he feared any, for she was implacable.

"So you think Cinq-Mars dares to send messages to Sedan?" mused Richelieu aloud. "He would join hands with them if he could. They would join hands with Spain and Austria against us, if they could. Ah, Marie, you are never long quiet! Always treachery from within—always!"

"This *Sieur Vaugon*," broke in the lisping Italian voice, "left Paris only today with a companion. Doubtless *M. de Savigny* will have news of him."

So *Chavigny's* name slipped in. Richelieu nodded. Had he glanced up, he might have caught something like a flash of malignant triumph, instantly gone, in the eyes of *Mazarin*.

"This *M. le Grand* grows too great—poor little debauched *Cinq-Mars*, to feel himself so high!" said Richelieu in contempt. "There should have

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been a report from London today. It has not arrived?"

"I have just decoded it, Your Eminence," and Mazarin laid down a paper. He knew what was coming now, and was impassive, ready, alert.

Richelieu glanced over the paper. His countenance changed. With an exclamation, he sat up sharply.

"Chevreuse—disappeared! Why didn't you give me this before?"

"Perhaps there is a connection, Your Eminence," said Mazarin smoothly. "If she has disappeared, then she has reached Flanders and Spanish help. If she has reached Flanders, then she has plans afoot——"

"Yes, yes! This messenger from Cinq-Mars, you mean? This Vaugon? It's possible." Richelieu frowned. "Let it wait—I'll think it over. By the way, what of this escape from the Bastille yesterday? I asked M. du Tremblay to report to me personally."

"He is waiting now, Monseigneur."

"Bring him in."

Still brusquely startled by the news from London, Richelieu looked up savagely as Mazarin ushered

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into the room a gentleman of fifty years, whose usually jovial air was now somewhat disconcerted. The governor of the Bastille, thanks to his connections, was as safe as anybody well could be, but when things went wrong nobody was safe before Richelieu.

"Well, monsieur, this is sad news I hear of you," said Richelieu coldly. "It seems you have permitted a prisoner to escape; above all, a prisoner of importance. Is the Bastille, then, at fault? Have I done wrong to convert it into a prison?"

"It is I who am at fault, Your Eminence," said Tremblay firmly.

"Expound, if you please."

"Two years ago this prisoner was committed under a *lettre de cachet*, accompanied by strict and explicit orders. He was inscribed on my register as Monsieur Personne, 'Nobody'. He was to be placed in the Basiniere in solitary confinement, was to be seen only by his jailer, was to be allowed one hour of liberty each day, but only after dark. As ordered, Your Eminence, I forgot his existence. I forgot it so completely that when, a week ago, it became necessary to repair the walls of the Basiniere, I still forgot

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it. This prisoner overpowered a workman, left him in the cell, and departed in his place."

"You've taken measures to find him again?"

M. du Tremblay threw out his hands. "His name is unknown. His face is unknown, though I find that a man of his description was shaved by the barber outside the gates, last night. Your Eminence, how can I trace such a person? Only his jailer has seen his face, and the man can give me no intelligent description."

Richelieu's icy sternness was melted by the complete avowal.

"M. du Tremblay, I ordered you to forget your prisoner, it is true—but not to forget his existence. Do not obey your orders too well, in future."

Dismissed, delighted at getting off so easily, the governor of the Bastille made all haste to depart. At the doorway appeared Chavigny.

"The report from Sedan, Your Eminence."

"Good. Remain, M. de Mazarin."

Mazarin withdrew into the shadows beside the fireplace. Chavigny advanced and gave Richelieu a document; the cardinal opened and read it carefully.

A curious observer might have noted how the

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man in the armchair and the man standing before the table shared a startling resemblance. The one was, perhaps, fifty; the other, though given an older look by prematurely gray hair, perhaps thirty. Both faces showed the same sombre air, the same cold self-control, the same features, eyes, lips. Only the face of Chavigny lacked, in some indefinable fashion, the look of majestic assurance that so held Richelieu apart from other men.

Why this singular resemblance between the minister and the secretary of state? Coincidence, perhaps—or perhaps not. According to some, it was the most natural thing in the world.

Richelieu looked up, laid aside the paper. “Nothing new, then?”

“Nothing, Your Eminence. I have not seen the report from London. That of four days ago showed Chevreuse feverishly trying to borrow money, writing, appealing. She is quite helpless.”

“On the contrary,” said Richelieu drily, “she has fled secretly from London. She is either in Flanders, raising the Spaniards to fresh efforts against us, or, for all I know, in France!”

Chavigny started. A sly, malicious smile touched Mazarin’s lips and was gone.

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"Bad news then, Monseigneur! But I have another matter to lay before you," said Chavigny. "This morning a gentleman called at the convent of the Carmelites, asked for Madame Thérèse, and was given an audience of fifteen minutes by Her Majesty in private. He departed with a companion, and at the Barrier d'Enfer took the Orleans road."

Now, indeed, the flash in Richelieu's eyes was not to be mistaken. The Queen conspiring with Cinq-Mars and the enemies of France! His voice crackled with imperious command.

"Who was this gentleman?"

"A man whose passport bore the name of Sieur Nicolas Vaugon. This passport——"

"Vaugon!" exclaimed Richelieu. "The passport sealed for M. le Grand!"

"Your Eminence knows of it?" said the startled Chavigny.

"Yes, of course. Wait a moment, now——"

Mazarin smiled again at the disconcerted air of the Secretary of State.

Richelieu was suddenly alert, roused, facing emergency. This man, who had exiled Marie de Medici, who had humbled Austria and Spain, saw the gage

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again flung down to him by a woman he had deemed crushed and helpless.

"Chevreuse gone from London—only the devil knows where she is now! And here's her hand at work—Guise, Beaufort, Cinq-Mars, sending a messenger, gaining a word or letter from the queen, going whither? Not to Jerusalem, that's certain! To Sedan, beyond doubt. Chavigny, who is this Vaugon? His description?"

"A stranger," and Chavigny gave what description he had gleaned. "The horse he rode was from the royal stables."

"Furnished by the Grand Equerry. Good! Such a horse, such a man, cannot escape notice."

"He had a companion," added Chavigny. "A M. de Bergerac of the guards, on leave."

"Send out men, a hundred men in parties of five. Not to follow, but to head off, this messenger. Let them ride north and east, and work back around Paris, covering every possible route. Vaugon rode south, meaning to circle around and so gain Sedan. You comprehend? Then act—quickly!"

Chavigny bowed and departed. Mazarin came forward, with deference.

"M. de Savigny has forgotten something," he

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lisped, "or perhaps does not know it. Last evening, as I have learned, this Vaugon and his companion dined at the Pinecone Tavern, with a third person, a young cadet of the guards by the name of Artagnan. He is the youngest of three brothers in the corps, I believe, a nephew of the well-known M. d'Artagnan, and something of a swordsman—perhaps you recall the affair of a Swiss officer recently killed near the Pont Neuf. He is worth a hundred other men to us now."

"Why?" snapped Richelieu, frowning.

"Because he alone knows the face of Vaugon. He is on duty here tonight."

Richelieu nodded. "Send for him."

Instead of obeying at once, Mazarin came to his side and spoke softly.

"Monseigneur, you recall the description of this Vaugon? Young, smooth-faced, blond! An unknown name. A stranger. Given great powers by a special passport secretly issued. An interview, and a private one, with Her Majesty——"

The cardinal started.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed sharply, with a movement as though to leap from his chair. His austere

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features contracted with pain. "She would not dare ! In such a guise——"

"It has served her before," said Mazarin gently. "True, she is no longer young ; she is therefore the bolder. As for daring—is there anything she would not dare?"

"True." Richelieu's eyes were smoldering now. "Ah, Marie—if you've ventured into my hand—where is that man? Swiftly, swiftly!"

Mazarin, foreseeing the imperative word, had summoned a secretary.

D'Artagnan, for the second time ordered up from the courtyard, entered the room and bowed. His rapid gaze touched upon Mazarin, who stood just behind the cardinal. Richelieu gave no sign of impatience, but assumed a paternal air.

"Approach, M. d'Artagnan. I believe you made your first campaign this summer, at the siege of Arras?"

"I had that honor, Monseigneur," and d'Artagnan so stressed the words that the empty formula took on its full worth.

Richelieu studied him a moment, struck by the air of youthful eagerness which yet masked a perfect coolness. Then, with a slight sigh, the red

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minister leaned forward and opened one of the many drawers in his desk. He produced a dossier, from which he selected a paper.

"Yes," he murmured. "Undoubtedly this is the man——"

He studied the paper. D'Artagnan's gaze drove suddenly at Mazarin, who made a slight gesture of reassurance. Richelieu looked up, frowning, menacing, and spoke with sharply penetrating voice.

"M. d'Artagnan, some days ago a matter was brought to my notice regarding a Swiss gentleman, of that corps, found last Monday by the archers of the Chatelet with a sword-thrust in his heart. What do you know of it?"

Perceiving that the whole affair must be there under the minister's eye, d'Artagnan assumed a reflective air.

"I did hear something about it, Monseigneur. If I might speak plainly——"

"By all means."

"It came to my ears that the man in question had maligned you, terming you a foul traitor to France and to His Majesty," said d'Artagnan bluntly. His words fell on the silence like a bomb. "I presume,

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Monseigneur, that someone in the French guards took the fellow to account."

"Eh?" Richelieu was genuinely astonished. "Maligned me—and was taken to account? The gentlemen of your corps, monsieur, are not noted for their attachment to the royal ministers," he commented drily. "Particularly for their attachment to me. Do you mean to affirm that you, for example, would draw sword on such a flimsy pretext?"

"The noblest pretext in the world, Your Eminence," said d'Artagnan firmly. "I do not prate of attachment. I am a gentleman, and I serve the king my master. If any man cast so vile a slander upon any one of my comrades, it would be my duty as a gentleman to resent it to the utmost."

At this speech, uttered with candor and sincerity, a tinge of color crept into the pale cheeks of the minister.

"Ah, M. d'Artagnan, you disarm me!" he said simply, and pushed away the dossier. "And more, you honor me. Let us come to plain speech, then, as between comrades. Last night, I think, you dined with a certain M. Vaugon."

Behind the speaker, Mazarin made a gesture of assent—at the same time frowning.

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"Not so, Monseigneur," said d'Artagnan. "I went to the Pinecone to sup. A fellow guardsman was there, M. de Bergerac of the company Casteljalous. He invited me to join him. I accepted. This Sieur Vaugon was with him."

Mazarin looked his approval.

"Then you had not met Vaugon previously?" asked Richelieu.

"He was a total stranger to me, and, I think, to M. de Bergerac also."

"You would know him if you saw him again?"

"Most assuredly."

The minister reached into a drawer. "Did you learn anything about him?"

Mazarin gestured caution, but the gesture was needless.

"Very little, Monseigneur. While we were dining, M. de Moray and his sergeants entered, in search of someone who was not there. This M. Vaugon was questioned, and produced a passport which apparently satisfied M. de Moray. I left soon afterward."

From his drawer, Richelieu produced a miniature portrait of a woman. Mazarin's eyes widened slightly as he saw it.

"Did Vaugon look like this picture in the face?"

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D'Artagnan took the miniature and frowned. "Your Eminence, it is difficult to say if a man looks like a woman—hm!" To his astonishment, from the corner of his eye he caught a sign of assent from the Italian. "Yes," he said. "I might say there was some resemblance—in a general way. I cannot say the man Vaugon actually resembled this lady."

"Recalling him to mind," said Richelieu, "would it appear possible to you that he was a woman wearing the clothes of a man?"

"Possible, yes," said d'Artagnan, catching another sign of assent, "but improbable. His oaths would have done credit to the late M. de Brantome himself."

Richelieu almost smiled at this. "So would the tongue of the woman I believe him to be, M. d'Artagnan. You are a cadet, therefore ambitious; a Gascon, therefore shrewd. Prove your ability to me, and the cassock of a guardsman is yours."

D'Artagnan bowed.

"You," pursued the minister, "appear to be the only person to know this Sieur Vaugon by sight. I believe him a most tricky individual, guilty of treason. He left Paris this morning by the Orleans

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road in company with M. de Bergerac. I think he means to go south, then circle around the environs of Paris, perhaps from Berny, and so make for Sedan. I have sent out men to head him off—I send you to follow and overtake him. M. de Mazarin, write an order for two of the best horses in my stables, to be selected by M. d'Artagnan, and give me the purse on the small table yonder."

With a repressed sigh, Mazarin handed him the purse, then leaned over the table to write out the order.

"Follow and overtake Vaugon," and Richelieu extended the purse to d'Artagnan. "Join company with him, discover whom he meets and what he does."

D'Artagnan stiffened slightly.

"Monseigneur, I am a soldier."

"I absolve you from any duty of a spy—you'll arrest Vaugon and bring him to me!"

The young man bowed. "I am to leave at once?"

"At once—tonight—within the hour! They'll undoubtedly stop at Berny, perhaps at Lonjumeau, for the night. You, on the contrary, will stop nowhere. Thus you'll be able to pick them up sometime tomorrow morning.

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"Do nothing in a hurry, once you've joined Vaugon," went on the minister thoughtfully. "It's extremely probable that he will either receive some letters on the way, or deliver some. In either case, seize the letters, the messengers, and Vaugon. He may not turn for Sedan at once; give him rein. When, in your judgment, he heads for Sedan—then persuade him, arrest him, do what the devil you please, but bring him to me in person. You comprehend?"

Mazarin was smiling down at the parchment under his quill.

"Perfectly, Your Eminence. I am to go alone?"

"Yes; this needs wits, not force. Seize any documents possible. In order to get hold of them, take your time with Vaugon." Richelieu signed the order for horses and sprinkled sand over it. "Pick what horses you like. Speed is essential if you are to catch him."

"I am to arrest him in your name, Monseigneur?"

At these apparently guileless words, Richelieu bent a grim smile on the speaker.

"Ah, Gascon!" he said. "You are an officer of the king. When the time for arrest comes, you

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will act in the king's name. Your uniform is your commission."

"Very good. And regarding M. de Bergerac—"

"Bah!" Richelieu gestured impatiently. "It's the other I want at all costs—at all costs, you understand?" he added, with the flash in his eye that betrayed his bitter and inflexible spirit. "Use your own time, your own weapons, your own discretion—but do not return without this Vaugon!"

"I shall return with him, Your Eminence."

"And he is not to be harmed. He is more than a woman—he is a great lady. Only at extremity are you to use force. That's all."

D'Artagnan bowed and departed. Richelieu sank wearily back into his chair.

"I have her, Mazarin—I have Chevreuse in my hands at last!" A deep breath escaped his tortured body. "That is, if it be Chevreuse indeed. Well, a good night's work here! Let's turn to other things. The marriage of M. de Fleury with Mlle. de Closset is arranged?"

"Fully, Monseigneur," lisped Mazarin. "M. de Fleury left this morning to pay his respects to the lady, remaining at the chateau until the contract is signed."

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“Good. Ah, my excellent Mazarin, if you were not an abbé, what a match I might reward you with, you also!”

A sardonic gleam flickered in the secretary's eye, as though to say that he might some day reward himself with a better match than any the red minister could arrange for him.

CHAPTER V

AS he clattered south with Cyrano on the stone-paved Orleans road, past Chatillon and Arcueil, with his whole past and future pinned to the passport in his pocket, Vaugon realized clearly enough on what a precarious reed of faith he was leaning.

Certainly, Richelieu was being craftily betrayed by those who dared not face him openly; and in the past, none of those who had dared betray the cardinal-duke had come to any good thereby. Vaugon knew he was acting directly for the queen, upon the commission of the king and upon the engagement of Mazarin; so far, all well and good. The passport would serve its purpose—up to a certain point.

If the matter came to a definite issue of authority, Vaugon saw clearly he could hope for nothing. The queen was powerless. The king was weak, ruled by his favorite Cinq-Mars, or M. le Grand, a young man mightily puffed up by his brief authority. Mazarin was a shifty Italian who would cover his

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own traces adroitly. Sieur Nicolas Vaugon must trust to luck that Richelieu knew nothing of what was going on, and must lean hard on his own wits. With Bergerac at his side, hope beckoned. That dissipated young poet was extremely self-reliant, was enjoying his errand and his morning gallop, and had no apparent care for the future. When two leagues had fallen behind, and at Bourg la Reine they found themselves only fifteen minutes behind their quarry, Cyrano leaned over in the saddle with a gay laugh.

"They'll stop at Berny, a league ahead," he said confidently. "Good wine there at the Croix, I can tell you! I don't know Fleury, but the odds are even I'll know his companions, so we'll stop them in gentlemanly fashion and go our way ahead of them."

"Three of them, eh?" said Vaugon. "Pity d'Artagnan isn't with us! I like him. But the queen commanded that Fleury should not be killed."

"He can be wounded then," said Cyrano.

A mile further they passed the post-diligence from Paris, swept past Chambord, and with foam-flecked horses bore down upon Berny, where the Versailles highway crossed that of Orleans. Just before reach-

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ing their crossroads, and at the edge of the great park running west into the forest of Verrières, was the auberge named the Croix de Berny. As the two riders turned in at the courtyard, they saw three very fine horses being rubbed down by grooms.

"Caught," said Cyrano.

"But not stopped," added Vaugon, and swung to earth. "Groom! Rub down these horses, cover them; a short drink and a handful of oats. We leave in half an hour."

He strode after Cyrano into the inn-room, where three previous arrivals were making a hearty noon meal, and ordered wine and food. They were brought in short order, and proved excellent. Across the room were the other three travelers, talking among themselves. Cyrano discussed them as he ate and drank.

"No hurry—a sword always works better on a full stomach," he said, grinning. "My grammar may be faulty, but the reasoning is excellent. I thought I'd know the others—both are gentlemen of the court, or rather of the Palais Cardinal! One's M. de Breuil, an excellent blade. The other, in the large beaver, is St. Aubin, without exception the worst fool in Paris.'

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St. Aubin looked the part, being foppishly attired, loud-voiced, vacuous. Breuil was a dark, solid, level-eyed man; as with Cyrano, his long arms bespoke the swordsman. It was upon Fleury that Vaugon's attention centered, however. He studied the man, sensing here an implacable antagonist.

Tall and powerful, Fleury became his handsome costume. As he laughed and talked with his companions, Vaugon decided that the man must be popular among other men; behind the arrogance of a noble was a reckless vigor and driving force, a steely fund of character, which might lead either to wild excesses or inflexible greatness. Like his comrades, he wore chin-tuft and mustache. Black heavy-lidded eyes glittered beneath heavy black brows which formed a bar across his face. Altogether a headstrong, passionate, dangerous man.

Hunger appeased, thirst lightened by the excellent wine, Cyrano stretched, rose, and stood looking around. Breuil, gazing at him, leaned over to Fleury and made some remark, at which Fleury burst into laughter. Cyrano turned and approached their table, Vaugon following slowly.

"Ah, my dear M. de Breuil," said Cyrano suavely, "you are in jesting mood today?"

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The other laughed. "Upon my word, M. de Cyrano, I didn't see you for the moment! There was—what shall I say?—an impediment. Yes, that's the word! Impediment to the sight! Really, M. de Cyrano, you should do something about it!"

The insult was patent, and as such, was obviously due to the wine-bottle. Cyrano went white, and his hand flashed out suddenly to the other's face in a hearty slap.

"I have done something about it, then," he said. Breuil started to his feet, but Vaugon came between them, fastening his gaze on Fleury.

"When one gentleman forgets himself and draws attention to the misfortune of another," he said gravely, "only a stable-boy would guffaw."

"Death of my life! Are you talking to me?" snapped Fleury.

"To the stable-boy who laughed, monsieur," said Vaugon calmly.

St. Aubin attempted startled protest. Fleury swept him aside and stood up. Cyrano with an air of great delight, bowed.

"May I present Sieur Nicolas Vaugon, messieurs?"

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"Here! M. de Fleury cannot fight!" cried St. Aubin excitedly. "He goes to his—"

"Silence!" exclaimed Fleury angrily. "Fight? M. Vaugon shall discover if I can fight. Gentlemen, shall we ride down the road together?"

"As soon as I can pouch a couple of bottles of this wine," said Cyrano. "Agreed!"

The host was summoned, scores were paid, the horses called up. In five minutes all had mounted and were riding forth, Fleury leading the way.

"Devil take it," said Cyrano, jogging at Vaugon's stirrup, "remember not to kill your man, or you'd be strung up in no time. A relative of the Cardinal isn't a mere M. de Breuil. I'll kill him, and that'll delay them sufficiently."

"You seem sure of yourself," said Vaugon curiously.

Cyrano only grinned.

A quarter-mile from the inn, they drew out of the road, and in a moment were encompassed by trees. In a long glade, free of snow, Fleury dismounted. Cyrano nodded assent; it was an excellent spot, sunlit in the center, with good footing. While the excited St. Aubin remained with the horses, the four

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removed mantles, hats and coats, and bared their blades.

"Look here, comrade—I forgot where you'd been the past two years," exclaimed Cyrano suddenly, drawing Vaugon to one side. "Let me compose your little matter—"

"Nonsense!" said Vaugon, drawing his sword. "I was a good hand with the tool two years ago; besides, they've all drunk far too much. Let be, and look at this blade. What do you think of it, eh?"

Instead of being a fairly heavy rapier, it was a piece of extremely thin steel; second look showed this steel to be damascened in gold on either side, and the fairy-like balance of the weapon was a marvel.

"Mordious!" exclaimed Cyrano, "You're going to fight with a bodkin! Let's see it—"

He took the sword, balanced it, bent the blade between his fingers, and whistled in astonishment as he returned it.

"Every man to his own taste in women, wine and weapons! It may serve. Ready, messieurs? If you'll be so good as to give the word—"

"Do we fight separately, or as four?" demanded Fleury.

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"As you like," said Cyrano carelessly. "Put St. Aubin in and make it a party of five, for all I care—"

"Separately, then," said Fleury. "En garde, monsieur!"

"En garde!" echoed Breuil.

Vaugon found himself crossing swords with a wrist of steel—and then, to his own vast surprise, his duel was won almost before it had begun. The rapier in his hand was like a flash of light, so marvelous was its balance, so deftly did it counter the steel of Fleury, who attacked rashly, impetuously. At Vaugon's first thrust, Fleury staggered and dropped his weapon—that needle-like blade had ripped across his upper arm. He stooped and picked up his rapier in his left hand.

"Continue, monsieur," he said. "I can use the weapon with either hand—"

Vaugon drew back, and pointed to the rush of blood.

"Not now, monsieur—here, St. Aubin! Quickly!"

Fleury staggered. St. Aubin sprang forward, lowered him to the ground, and went to work binding up the wound. It was in no way serious, save for the loss of blood. Vaugon turned and stared at the scene presented by the second combat.

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And it was worthy of being stared at. If Breuil were accounted one of the foremost rapiers in Paris, then Bergerac, despite his youth, was known as the most savage yet delicate duelist in France. His long arms, his powerful torso, his agility, all served him in attack—and he was attacking now, with a certain deliberate ferocity singular to see. And as he attacked, he began to talk, lightly, carelessly.

"We're well matched, my friend—well matched, eh? A pretty thing to watch, this—impossible to foretell the end? Ah, no! I know a very neat little feint and riposte in tierce—when the time comes. One must wait the time. There's the subject for a very satisfactory rondelet—"

"Curse your rhyming!" panted Breuil, with a savage lunge. "I've heard of your tricks—they'll not work with me. Rhyme all you please, long-nose!"

"Exactly," and Cyrano laughed gaily. His tongue seemed completely disassociated from his brain and sword. He fought mechanically, pressing the attack, and yet went on speaking as he fought, his voice light and almost jesting.

"One who waits the time, in love or war—there's an excellent opening line! Come—what does it

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lead to, my dear Breuil? Not hard to guess. A slight change or two—”

“One waits his time, in love or war
In travel, politics or crime ;
Though gain be distant, victory far,
One waits his time—”

Cyrano's foot slipped. He was down to one knee, up again, Breuil's rapier driving through his shirt without touching the flesh beneath. It was fast work, furious work, and both men were beginning to stream sweat. Then the lightly mocking voice of Cyrano rang out anew.

“A rondelet, you say, instead of a rondel? So be it. We've an excellent start, but one should have a bit of philosophy in the center of the feast. Just to prepare for that feint and thrust in tierce I mention it to you—

“Fools hurry on, where wise men climb
With care ; a moment's haste may mar
A lifework—patience is a star
Beckoning on to heights sublime!
One waits his time.”

Breuil growled in his throat. He was fighting for his life now, and knew it, read it in the hot and blazing dark eyes of Cyrano. He drew himself together, pressed in to attack in his turn, bore the

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guardsman back and back. The veins of his face stood out in fury, and he seemed set on steel springs, so perfect was his footwork, so fast and deadly were his lunges. Yet Cyrano, face glistening with sweat, only smiled scornfully as he gave ground. The swords of the two men held entwined like glittering serpents in the sunlight, with click, clash, slither and ring—their feet stamped fast on the hard earth, their breaths whitened frostily on the air.

St. Aubin shouted shrill encouragement at his friend. Fleury, white-faced, sat and stared in fascination. Vaugon, sword still in hand, had not moved from his place. Then Cyrano stiffened, once more assumed the offensive as though tireless, and his braggadocio laugh startled even his opponent.

“Ha! I’ve found the rhyme at last—and we’ll not need that thrust in tierce either!” he cried out. “For the throat, M. de Breuil—for the throat! My signature, as M. de Moray likes to term it! When the moment comes, then—now to finish that pretty rondelet!

“The moment comes, fate draws the bar,
Throws wide the portal! Here’s my rhyme
Complete—death holds the door ajar—
One bides his time!”

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Cyrano thrust, thrust again, disengaged, and his arm shot out like light. A terrible cry broke from his opponent. The rapier fell from Breuil's hand and he stood clutching at his throat until suddenly he pitched forward on his face. Cyrano wiped the sweat out of his eyes and stood panting, then;

"Finished, Vaugon? Very well. Not a bad *ron-delet* I made there, eh? My dear *comte*, can we be of any assistance to you?"

"You've killed him!" shouted St. Aubin. He ran to Breuil, stooped over him, and came erect with ghastly face. "You've killed him!"

"Eh?" Cyrano gave him a slow, disdainful stare. "What the devil else did you expect?"

"Silence, St. Aubin!" commanded Fleury, getting to his feet. "Gentlemen, we need not detain you—we'll return to the Croix de Berny. To our next meeting, M. Vaugon!"

Vaugon saluted him in silence, then took up his coat and mantle, donned them, and followed Cyrano to the horses. They mounted and made their way out of the trees to the road.

"So! That fool St. Aubin will have a little work to do now," said Cyrano, breaking silence. "Well,

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not so bad, eh? How did you manage him so swiftly?"

"By accident," said Vaugon. Cyrano gave him a swift look, and grinned.

"Heaven send a few such accidents my way! I had hard work of it for a moment. On, my friend—we've a good ride ahead if we're to reach that chateau before nightfall. And reach it we must. How did you like my rhyme?"

"Better than its object," answered Vaugon. The guardsman broke into laughter.

"Object? My dear fellow, my sole object is to put point into the other man as rapidly as possible! Granted that my rhyming ability confuses him—but consider! I must do two things at once! The odds are palpably even."

Vaugon nodded. "True enough."

"Besides, I confess to you the scrape of swords excites me, lifts me to far heights, takes me out of myself," continued Cyrano. "Life's a miserable thing at best for a poor devil who must live on his guard's pay and the remnants of his patrimony—credit at the Pinecone, a wench wherewith to ponder the temptations of the flesh, and nothing in the future except perhaps the fame of a starveling poet."

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Bah! What's this kind of a life, when one has dreams and cannot get on with them? Here, we'll split this bottle as we ride—"

Breaking off his self-revealing speech, Cyrano got out one of the bottles he had fetched from the Croix de Berny, and managed to get it open. He gulped down a good half of it, handed the bottle to Vaugon, and the two men rode on refreshed. Rested by the double halt, the horses held steadily to the south at a brisk trot.

Vaugon did not forget his glimpse into the guardsman's heart. Nothing in the future—it was only too true, for a man without great connections or wealth; especially for a man marked out by nature apart from other men, as was Cyrano. Stamped as he thus was physically, he accepted the matter with a blithe heart, faced the world bravely and defiantly, and when mockery touched him too bitterly, cloaked his savage resentment with rhymes. After all, there was much to be said for Savinien de Cyrano.

They covered the two leagues farther to Lonjumeau at a brisk, steady pace, and when the old town on the Yvette opened out before them, and they slowed down for the sharply descending approach, Cyrano broke silence.

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"My friend, here's where we leave the Orleans route—you can see the Ste. Genevieve road cutting across the crest beyond town, there to the left. With your permission, I propose to let you go on alone."

"Eh?" Vaugon flung him a glance of sharp surprise. "You're in earnest?"

"I'm always in earnest," and Cyrano chuckled. "First, my horse isn't from the royal stables, and he'll not go much farther at your pace. Second, I've a feeling, a mental inspiration, that we're being followed; and whoever is after us, knows you chiefly by my face—rather, my nose. You comprehend? And third, our Mlle. de Closset expects one man, not two. Now, if I wait here until night, any pursuers will come up and be thrown off the scent. I'll put them on the Dampierre road. After dark, even early in the morning, I'll come on to Ste. Genevieve and meet you."

"Fleury wouldn't set anyone after us," protested Vaugon. "At least, so swiftly. And what need of sacrificing yourself?"

"Tush and nonsense!" ejaculated Cyrano. "It's not Fleury I fear, but cardinalist spies back in Paris. Don't you know the queen is watched like a hawk? I have the sensation of being followed; animal

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instinct, perhaps. No harm done if I wait here at the post tavern until morning, and then come along to our meeting place."

"If you like. But what meeting-place? I'm utterly ignorant of the country—"

"That am not I," said Cyrano confidently. "If the girl goes along with you, she'll serve as guide. If not, find your way! We'll meet at noon tomorrow, or before, at the inn of Savigny—it's on the Orge, not so far from her chateau, but well off the roads. I was down there after the summer campaign, curing a wound in my throat and another in my heart, in the most pleasant of company. A lady who—well, no matter now. Agreed?"

To the echo of his laughter, Vaugon shrugged.

"Agreed, then. Stop here for the night; the inn of Savigny, tomorrow noon, without fail!"

They clattered over the bridge and rode into Longjumeau, and so on to the post tavern. Vaugon made no pause other than to ascertain his route out of town, then shook hands with Cyrano and departed.

The afternoon was sunny and warm. Cyrano, who had shared Vaugon's ample purse, made himself comfortable with a few bottles of excellent wine and

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a rosy-cheeked serving girl who capitulated to his nimble tongue. In ten minutes he was getting all the gossip of the countryside, and making silly rhymes to the vast admiration of his audience.

Next morning, he was just descending the stairs for his morning draught, when he turned sharply from the inn-room doorway and strode out into the courtyard. A single rider, with a led horse, was just arrived. Cyrano gaped at the two magnificent beasts, then again at the cavalier, under whose cloak showed his blue-and-silver uniform scarf.

"D'Artagnan!"

The cadet was ordering the saddle changed to his fresh horse, when Cyrano's delighted shout reached him. Cyrano followed it in person, and clapped his long arms about the smaller man in a warm embrace.

"Mordious! What horses you ride——uniform scarf, too! On business?"

"Of a sort," replied d'Artagnan. "I've ridden most of the night. Well, this is a lucky meeting! Where's our friend Vaugon?"

"Riding the roads." Cyrano checked himself suddenly, on meeting the searching eyes of the cadet.

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Peril abruptly dilated his nostrils. "But come in, come in, rest and talk!"

The other followed him silently, and to their order the host brought bread and wine. Cyrano shoved flagon and bottle at his guest.

"There! Wash the dust from your tongue, then tell me what the devil you're doing away down here when you should be standing guard at the Louvre or the Palais Cardinal!"

D'Artagnan nodded and drank deeply. When he set down his cup, his gaze countered that of Cyrano intently, probingly.

"Horses," he said, "from the stables of His Eminence. Uniform. Pistols at the saddle. What do all these suggest?"

"Something devilish unpleasant," said Cyrano. "Arrest?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. As one good Gascon to another, my business doesn't concern you; does that make you rest easier?" D'Artagnan smiled. "If I'm not mistaken, there's trouble in your wake—at Berny, to be precise. Eh?"

"Frank talk or none," said Cyrano, suddenly impassive, level-eyed. "I'm off in five minutes."

"Then I'm with you, at your service!"

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Cyrano's black brows met, as he frowned across the table.

"Only yesterday we were wishing for your company—but, my friend, I smell a rat somewhere, and it smells like a rat in red, upon my word! Not that I doubt you in the least, but I doubt those beautiful horses of yours."

"Not badly put. A fair exchange, then?"

"Done with you. Whom are you to arrest?"

"No one, perhaps. I've been sent to keep an eye on a lady, if I can find her. She's disguised as a man and is cooking up treason against the state. There you are."

"Mordious!" Cyrano relaxed slightly, and stared. "I'm with Vaugon on his errand. Do you want to know what it is? We're to carry off a lady; what's better, a ward of the king. How's that for a fair exchange?"

"As far as it goes. Are you serious?" D'Artagnan stared in turn. He knew Vaugon was thought to be a woman in disguise; this was utterly absurd, but was none of his affair. "Eh? A royal ward? Man, that means the Bastille!"

"Not under the king's seal," said Cyrano confidently. "You rascal, be frank with me! Has your

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errand anything to do with our Mlle. de Closset?"

"Nothing, upon my honor." Amazement seized upon d'Artagnan. "De Closset? But she's the wealthiest unmatched lady in France, and a bit crazy to boot!"

"How d'you know?"

D'Artagnan shrugged. "My dear Cyrano, I make it my business to know. Having no other means of advancement, I must advance by means of the ladies; so far, at least, they've not been indifferent to me! My campaign's most methodical, I assure you. I have all the good ones marked down—"

Cyrano guffawed at this naïve statement; it reached his sense of humor, for it was not in the least cynical. In fact, such a ladder was a deliberate road to glory for more than one eminent soldier of France, and d'Artagnan was in the best of company.

"Agreed, then," said Cyrano. "You're not telling the secrets of His Eminence, and I'm guarding those of my friend. We're at truce. Get a bite to eat and we'll be off, for I'm to meet Vaugon at noon. We can go into matters more fully then. Eh?"

"Right. I heard about your duel at Berny. If you're followed—"

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Cyrano touched his sword and shrugged, and the cadet nodded assent. They were, for the moment, at truce. It was no more than truce, as d'Artagnan knew very well—and as Cyrano shrewdly suspected.

CHAPTER VI

IT was nearly dark when Vaugon, after dining comfortably and leisurely at Ste. Genevieve, passed the gates of the Chateau de Closset and rode up the tree-dark avenue to the gray stone chateau beyond. He wondered vaguely what sort of a woman he would meet, but this point troubled him little. A groom came running out to take his weary horse, and from the entrance hurried a footman with eager word.

"M. le Comte de Fleury? You have baggage——"

"M. de Fleury will not arrive until tomorrow," said Vaugon. "No, don't lead the horse off! Keep him here, as I'm not stopping. I have important news for Mlle. de Closset and must see her at once. Announce Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

"If Monsieur will follow me?"

Vaugon followed. That swift inquiry for Fleury put him on guard—the count was expected, then—by whom? Beyond doubt, by spies here installed.

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Richelieu was said to have more spies at his command than the king had soldiers; to get this watched and guarded blossom of the court safely away might well prove no easy matter.

He found his expectations confirmed when, after ten minutes of waiting in a very handsome little salon, Mlle. de Closset entered, followed by an older and grimmer woman, who took a chair and said nothing, but inspected the visitor sharply.

At first glance, Vaugon's heart sank. The girl before him was pretty enough, but he had hoped for other qualities. Violet eyes under dark brows, frippery of high-piled hair, laces and flashing gems; he almost shrugged as he bowed low to her. Then her voice, a rather deep and rich contralto, struck quickly at him.

"So you're from M. de Fleury—and he is not coming tonight?"

"He has been unfortunately detained, mademoiselle," said Vaugon gravely. "I was asked to give you this token and to say he would arrive tomorrow."

Had his name meant nothing to her, then? Had the queen been mistaken in saying she expected him? Vaugon could not tell. He extended the

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ring given him, and a little cry of delight escaped the girl. She held it up, turning gaily to her companion.

"See, here's the ring M. de Fleury promised to bring me! Look at the pretty gold-work on it—but I forget. Monsieur, you are one of his friends? You must remain——"

Vaugon bowed. "Mademoiselle, I regret I must depart instantly, for I am called by most important business elsewhere, and must ride back the same road I came hither——"

"But surely you'll see M. de Fleury? He is stopping at Lonjumeau, perhaps?"

Vaugon assented, wondering. Swiftly, impulsively, the girl turned and pulled open an *escritoire* against one wall, seized a quill, and scratched a few lines. Then, as the older woman was about to speak, she turned quickly to Vaugon and extended the paper.

"Take this to him, monsieur—may I so far impose upon you? I trust he's not ill?"

"Not very," said Vaugon. "A slightly hurt arm, I believe. He fell from his horse. The surgeon has advised him to wait the night, and come on tomorrow."

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He saw a flash of impish laughter liven her face at this, yet failed to divine the reason. Insisting upon taking his leave at once, knowing the letter in his hand must tell him more than she dared say, he bowed again and took his departure—cursing his mission and his apparent inability to carry it through.

Regaining his horse, he mounted, gave the groom a coin, and headed back down the avenue toward the gates. It was not yet dark. Half way to the entrance, he ventured to open the paper, and to read its message. His eyes widened on it:

“In an hour. Half a league from here, on the Morsan road.”

A slow whistle of amazement broke from him. Had the girl been acting all the time? Yes, beyond doubt—here was proof of it! He laughed, thrust away the paper, and for a space his mood lightened. She had been quick enough, sharp enough, after all!

And yet—once past the gates, once back in the road curving through the forest of Esugny toward Morsan, he faced realities once more. She had been warned, yes, and would somehow get away, regarding the whole affair as a gay lark, a bit of

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madcap jest, a pretty game in which she had naught to lose. She would join him, a powdered, luxury-loving girl, a tender and precious thing in her fine silks and laces and jewels, and he was supposed to hide such a creature as he rode through France!

"She may have sense enough to put a cloak over her silks, devil take her!" thought Vaugon in no little chagrin. "Cyrano was right; we must have a coach and cart her about from inn to inn, from town to town—pest on the whole thing! It's mad folly."

He rode on through the gathering darkness until the road broke from the forest depths to strike out across the high ground for Morsan. Then he dismounted, took a bottle of wine from his saddlebags, and set himself to pass the time.

It was fortunate he had the wine, since his wait was a cold one. There had been much snow on these heights above the Orge; the fields were white, and here at the edge of the forest the road was crisply heaped with snow, which beneath the growing starlight left the approach fairly clear to sight.

Vaugon had finished the bottle, and was tramping up and down to keep warm, when he heard a voice caroling gaily under the trees. It was a strong

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and joyous voice, and at first he thought Mlle. de Closset was approaching, but on hearing the words of the song he changed his mind. This, a new and popular air of Paris, had been much on Cyrano's lips during their morning's ride south, and was no song for drawing-rooms or young ladies :

“Oh, Jacques was young, and he longed to see
The joys of a soldier's life;
So he joined a troop of the cavalry,
By help of the captain's wife!

Oh, Jacques was sent to the Low Countree
And down there he learned to fight;
But I heard tell in the cavalry
That he fought his best at night!”

Vaugon caught sight of a horse walking along the road toward him. The song went on :

“Oh, Jacques came back to gay Paree
And married a wealthy dame:
She bought him a troop in the cavalry—
Woman's the road to fame!”

The singer was approaching, and after another verse or two involving a young marquis and touch-

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ing very frankly on matrimonial escapades, came to its conclusion:

“Oh, Jacques grew old, and proud was he
Of his marshal's baton now!
But how they grinned in the cavalry
At the horns on his battered brow!”

The singer came to an abrupt halt, perceiving Vaugon, and uttered a resounding oath.

“What ho, my lonely guardian of the forest!
'Ware of the wolves hereabouts! Come along with me and we'll go seek warm wine and a deep-bosomed country wench, eh? It's not far to Morsan, and at the White Horse there we can find all we seek and more. Come! Better a crust in company than a loaf alone, so into the saddle and we'll show these country folk how the game's played in Paris. Eh, comrade?”

Vaugon saw a cavalier, whose plumed beaver and scarf proclaimed the soldier. A young blade, evidently—perhaps some noble of the neighborhood intent upon practising Paris debauchery in the provinces, and careless what happened.

“Thanks for the invitation,” he rejoined, “but I've other business, so don't let me detain you.”

“Bah! Life's long and love's short,” answered

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the other, and with lithe agility swung out of the saddle. "Leave a soldier and a comrade alone here with the wolves? Perish the thought! I'll keep you company, comrade——"

"Be on your way," said Vaugon irritably. "I've no desire for company."

"Eh? Why not, then?" The reckless merry voice deepened in swift anger. "Is this the way to treat a comrade? Let's have a look at you, my friend! Death of my life—if you haven't the look of that same rascal who pinked poor Fleury this morning! Eh?"

The other swaggered close, long rapier cocking up his cloak behind. Vaugon cursed under his breath, scenting trouble with this drunken sprig of nobility.

"Comrade, I'm awaiting a lady," he said with assumed frankness. "Therefore, I beg of you, ride your way and——"

"A lady? Oh, ho!" exclaimed the other, stepping back. "No lady hereabouts except Mlle. de Closset—so that's the way of it, eh? Be damned to you for a foul liar, then! She meets no wandering gallant on the roadside! Here's what I think of you——"

His rapier scraped forth and flashed in the star-

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light. "En garde!" he cried, and lunged. Vaugon's thin blade was already out; he parried, cursed, found his own steel gripped and held by the other, knew he was facing a real swordsman. Then, as the blades clicked and rasped, his opponent broke into a laugh.

"Fell from his horse, eh? That was a rare one! All the world knows Fleury is the finest horseman in France——"

Vaugon disengaged and leaped back, in sudden amazement.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded. His opponent lowered blade and broke into a laugh.

"So we condescend to questions now? I'm, Chevalier de Berville, at your service, in search of a certain Sieur Vaugon."

"I am he," said Vaugon.

"Naturally. If you'd been halfway polite about it, instead of devilish gruff and dignified, I'd have given you my message in the first place."

"Your pardon," said Vaugon, putting away his sword. "You have a message?"

"For your ears. We're to ride on together. The lady whom you await will join us tomorrow morning."

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Vaugon shrugged. Probably the girl did not care to trust herself in the hands of an unknown man, regardless of who had sent him.

"I know nothing of you, M. de Berville," he said. "If you——"

The chevalier chuckled and thrust away his rapier.

"Monsieur, I'm an old friend of mademoiselle, and in her confidence. Come! I was but jesting with you; let us be friends, and speak frankly. You were sent by the queen, therefore you're to be trusted."

Vaugon met with a firm yet delicate handclasp, and knew then he was dealing with a noble, no soldier.

"Very well. I have a friend who arranged to meet me at the inn of Savigny, somewhere near here, tomorrow."

"An excellent place," said Berville. "I'm to leave word for her at Morsan. We'll be there in half an hour, ride on to Savigny, and wait there—a quiet place, none better. To horse and on our way, then!"

They mounted and set forth, leaving the trees behind and jogging along the wind-swept heights.

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Berville, after a little silence, broke into garrulous talk.

"Comrade, you know nothing of me; easily told. On the contrary, I know nothing of you, except that you're sent by eminent people. A little mutual knowledge might well be shared, since our heads, or at least our liberties, are very much at stake in this matter. Mademoiselle will have the devil's job to get rid of that old hag of an aunt—my own aunt, too, as mademoiselle is my cousin, but all the same a perfect fiend, I assure you! She hates the sight of me. I've been hiding in a summer-house for the past day, because I'm not supposed to come to the chateau. And spies—the country down this way is filled with them. Dampierre belongs to Mme. de Chevreuse, and his most scarlet eminence keeps a close eye on things connected with that poor lady!"

"For all I know," said Vaugon, "you may be a spy yourself. I came to your cousin with certain guarantees; you come to me with a wine-thickened tongue——"

Berville held out a hand, and in the starlight Vaugon saw the glitter of the same little gold ring the queen had given him.

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"Answer enough?"

"Enough. You're her cousin, bear her trust—I ask no more."

"Then pardon the wine if I do," and Berville laughed. "Who are you?"

"Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

"Bah! That name was agreed upon because no such person exists. You're a gentleman, but I'm devilish curious to know more! And who's the friend we meet tomorrow?"

Vaugon laughed and unbent a trifle, for about this man in the darkness there was a very winning quality, an engaging appeal.

"Nothing more to know about me. His Majesty has given me my present name, therefore I keep it. My friend is one M. de Bergerac, a guardsman."

"Therefore a Gascon. Pest take it, but you're a stiff one!" cried the chevalier, half angry, half amused, to judge by his tone. "What do you plan to do? Where go?"

"That depends on the danger——"

"Of which there'll be plenty."

"—— and on your fair cousin. We'll have to get a coach for her, drag her around over the country, Lord knows what else!"

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"You don't seem to relish the prospect."

"Who would?"

"Bah! She's a pretty baggage, that girl. Most men would think themselves in luck."

Vaugon shrugged. "I grant you that, Berville, Pretty, and has brains, no matter what they say of her; a rare combination! None the less, she's a fine lady, a frail chit of a girl—well, you see for yourself how it'll be. If there's hard riding to do, then luck's against us."

The chevalier seemed vastly amused, and roared with laughter.

"Stick her on a horse and tie her feet!" he advised. "But she'll pull through; I've ridden with that girl, trained her. Work and weather won't spoil her."

"That remains to be seen. There's Morsan ahead, eh?"

They rode into Morsan, a little village crouched above the long hills, paused at the tavern while Berville spoke a few words to a groom, and then rode on. The chevalier led the way to a narrow road winding down the hill and on toward the Orge.

"You've left directions for her, therefore for any

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pursuers," said Vaugon, as the horses descended the steep path.

"We'll leave further directions at Savigny for the pursuers." Berville laughed gaily. "Half a league away in the wood—we'll soon be there. It's an honest tavern, with a most admirable cellar. I know it well."

A short road, indeed, and desolate. In half an hour they were clattering across the bridge and heading on to the village, where a comfortable old inn jogged elbows with the church and monastery. Vaugon suddenly recalled that he was utterly weary and saddle-sore, and could scarce stand once he was out of the saddle.

"Shall we share a room?" said Berville, when a groom came to his call. "I'm minded to eat and try a bottle or two of wine——"

"Suit yourself as to that," said Vaugon. "All I want is a bed. I haven't ridden a horse before to-day in two years, and you know what that means."

"Death of my life—two years?" Berville stared at him amazedly. "Where've you been, then—in the Bastille?"

Vaugon caught his breath. What a fool, to talk thus freely!

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"Perhaps," he said with a laugh, and staggered toward the host, who had appeared. "A room, a fire, my saddle-bags—and peace!" he ordered. The host waved his lantern jovially.

"All these and whatever else you seek, monsieur! A room is ready. Will you mount?"

Leaving the chevalier to his own devices, Vaugon mounted the stairs along the courtyard wall and in ten minutes more was shivering himself into an excellent bed. He was asleep before the cold sheets had yet taken on warmth.

He wakened to a misty morning, the sun showing as a dim red ball above the hills. He was dressing when a knock sounded at his door, and to his call Berville entered. Vaugon swung around, waved his razor in reply to a gay greeting, and examined the chevalier with no little curiosity.

"You're a late one!" said Berville, dropping into a chair. "Saddle-stiff?"

"As the devil. I'll be through in a moment."

He continued shaving, with half an eye on his companion. Berville was fair, blue-eyed, perhaps forty years of age—older than Vaugon had deemed him the previous night. His face was stamped with a singular expression of vigor, energy—the heavy-

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lidded eyes were almost startling in their imperious command. The man was rather stout, his clothes were travel-stained yet of princely material, and on his slender white fingers glittered half a dozen jeweled rings of great value.

"When does our friend arrive?" asked Vaugon.

"She's here now."

"What? Already?" Vaugon turned. "Where?" Berville jerked thumb at floor, and smiled.

"Ordering a morning meal for us all. Don't worry. I've trained her, and she'll not bring any trouble on us!" The sharp blue eyes probed suddenly at Vaugon, with a most singular expression of puzzled wonder. "Come, my friend; I expect to leave you here, perhaps this very morning. And I have a certain responsibility toward this fair cousin of mine. Would you object to telling me why you haven't straddled a horse for two years?"

Vaugon carefully wiped his razor, dried his face, and then met the keen blue eyes of the chevalier.

"I would object, M. de Berville," he said coldly. Berville laughed, showing very white and even teeth.

"So? It's true I get very little news from Paris," he said easily, "yet occasionally some comes to me from other quarters. I was in England some time

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ago, and there I heard of the odd disappearance of a very promising young man. Shall I continue?"

"If you like." Vaugon continued his dressing, yet a cold hand had laid hold of him. Who or what the devil was this country noble?

"I might say I know who this promising young man was," said the chevalier calmly. "In fact, I might say I know who you are, *Sieur Vaugon*."

Vaugon turned, and so chill and terrible were his eyes that Berville started.

"*M. de Berville*," he said, quietly and yet with evident meaning, "if you persist in a subject which is distasteful to me, I shall kill you in two minutes."

"My dear friend, I'm thinking only of your good——"

"No protests," said Vaugon curtly. "I should kill you here and now, but I'm not yet so afraid for my own neck. *De Berville*—that name also is a lie, I think! Touched you there, did I?" He smiled thinly as he noted the chevalier's slight change of expression. "Perhaps the question of identity is as tender with you as with me, eh? Last night I took you for a rustic young man; this morning, I perceive you are neither so very young nor so very rustic. I'm not interested in you. If your interest

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in me continues, I promise you it'll meet with a sword-thrust. Do I make myself plain?"

"Perfectly." Berville waved his slender hand gracefully. "At least, may I give you a well-meant bit of advice?" He rose. "Whatever you do, don't go to Paris! There are certain people alive who may remember that the late Duc de Montmorenci had a triangular mole just before his ear. Well, comrade, you'll find us below. Come soon! I'm expecting a messenger to meet me here this morning—if he comes, I may have to ride off on the instant."

Berville swung out of the room, humming a gay tune.

For a moment Vaugon stood motionless, staring blankly before him. That mole! He knew well enough it was the only possible means of betrayal, and so he had left his hair uncut before his ears, to cover it. And this country noble had pierced to the truth of everything almost at a glance!

Vaugon finished dressing, put away his things, packed his saddle-bags. Who was this somewhat effeminate nobleman, this amazing character obviously using an assumed name, this cousin of Mlle. de Closset, who appeared to be a person of power

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and command? Well, no matter. The girl was waiting. Remembering this, Vaugon hastened to descend.

He found the two of them at a window-table in the main room of the tavern, and met with a distinct surprise. Instead of a girl, he found himself meeting a very handsome young man. The previous evening he had talked with the girl, yet now he could not recognize either her features or her sex in the cloaked and velveteed cavalier who bowed to him with laughing eyes and a gay greeting, though he did recognize the warm violet eyes.

"Good morning, *Sieur Vaugon!*" she exclaimed merrily, and even her voice could scarce betray her. "You didn't expect to see me?"

"You, but not as you are," said Vaugon, and Berville laughed out at this.

"No, he was looking for a frail damsel who'd shriek at the rasp of a sword! Well, M. Vaugon, this is our friend the Comte le Plessis, so sit down and ask him what my real name is, if you like. None of us are using our own names, it appears."

Vaugon shrugged, as he took a seat, and felt the eyes of the girl studying him.

"I'm not interested in your name, *monsieur*. I

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happen to be using my own; since the king bestowed it on me, I shall keep it."

"Is that cunning or simplicity?" asked Berville in mockery.

"Devil take you!" snapped Vaugon, leaning forward with a sudden blaze in his eyes. "What are you driving at? My word is my word. If you've anything to say about it, then say it now! If not, keep your tongue between your teeth."

A flash of anger shot through the blue eyes of Berville, then was gone.

"The subject's closed," he responded quietly.

Plessis had looked from one to the other anxiously, sharp uneasiness in those violet eyes. Vaugon divined that this anxiety was not for him, but for the chevalier. At this instant, however, came interruption. A horse pounded into the courtyard and a man called out sharply, urgently, as he swung to earth.

"M. de Berville! Is M. de Berville here or not?"

The rider appeared in the doorway, dust-covered, blue with cold—evidently a gentleman, and as evidently in desperate haste. Berville rose and beckoned.

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"This way, Armand! All's safe. Here's wine. You have news? Give it freely."

The man staggered forward, saluted the three, dropped into a chair, and gulped at the wine Berville put into his hand. A long breath escaped him. "Diantre! A cold night's ride! Safe to talk?"

"Quite," said Berville impatiently. "Your news?"

"Danger. Something is discovered—St. Bris brought word that men are out on all the eastern roads—a network of parties, working east and south from Paris, combing every road and track. If you head north and east, you're lost. Nothing is known for certain yet."

"No news from Mazarin?" asked Berville, his eyes shining as though he enjoyed this message of danger. At the Italian's name, Vaugon's sharp gaze went to him.

"Not a word. I saddled and rode to Morsan, got your message and came on here. Your only chance now is to head westward, swiftly."

"Good. Ride at once, eh? Host! Have my horse saddled!" Berville rose, held out one hand to Plessis, the other to Vaugon, and laughed gayly.

"My friends, I'm off—we'd only bring danger on one another. Plessis, you can trust Sieur

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Vaugon absolutely, you comprehend? Absolutely. His presence, his aid, is a miracle! Vaugon, forget your worries. Remember only that Comte le Plessis is a comrade who needs no coach, but can endure as much as you or more, and use sword or pistolet at need. Farewell, and good luck! Damnation to the cardinal, and a joyous meeting at his funeral! Adieu, my cousin; don't see us off. Remain here. Adieu!"

He embraced Plessis, gave Vaugon a firm grip, and strode hastily out with the messenger. Vaugon looked after them, saw them mount and go spur-ring forth, and then dropped back into his seat—still astonished by the warm encomiums of the chevalier.

"I'd give a good deal to know who that man is!" he muttered.

"Is that a question?"

Vaugon looked up, met the laughing eyes of Plessis, and remembered.

"No, it's not a question, comrade," he said, with the quick smile that so relieved the gravity of his features. "People who live in glass houses—you know!"

"The chevalier said to trust you absolutely, and I do," came the bright response. "However, that

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was only so far as I'm concerned. So I'd best not tell you who M. de Berville is, my friend. If the cardinal catches him, though, all France will ring with it!"

Vaugon dismissed the subject.

"Let it pass. Our present occupation is more personal. You've a horse?"

"And saddle-bags. Enough for my needs, I assure you. Did you really think I'd want a coach?"

"Hard to say." Vaugon met her eyes, and they exchanged a smile. "Since you're a man and a comrade, you understand that such a ride as ours may have unpleasant moments?"

Plessis nodded cheerfully.

"Granted. None so unpleasant as that in which I'd marry Fleury, though! So cheer up, comrade! I wasn't brought up at court, I'm not half the fool they say I am, and if you need a good oath at a pinch, I can help supply it. A groom tried to stop me when I rode off this morning, and I had to put a bullet into him. One spy the less for Richelieu!"

"You're pursued?" asked Vaugon quickly. Plessis shook his head.

"They think I went the other way, to Ste. Genevieve. What's your plan?"

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"To await a friend here, M. de Bergerac of the guards. Then trust his head and yours."

"You couldn't do better," said Plessis, and laughed merrily over his wine-up. "So here's luck all around—and damnation to the cardinal!"

It was just noon when Cyrano and d'Artagnan rode into the tavern courtyard.

CHAPTER VII

“**N**AME of a name—d’Artagnan here!
What luck!”

Vaugon, gripping hands at once with the guardsman and the cadet, stared at the latter in open astonishment. He caught a grimace from Cyrano but did not understand it.

“Aye,” said Cyrano. “We joined forces at Lonjumeau, rode hard, and here we are! When we left the main road at Epinay, we heard that M. de Fleury had just passed through, but riding alone. I’ll wager a pistol that devilish fool St. Aubin stopped behind to set the world after me for killing Breuil! Well, what luck?”

“Plenty,” said Vaugon. “But you, d’Artagnan—it’s a miracle to find you! Come in and thrice welcome!”

He led them into the tavern, and to the table where Plessis stood up to meet them.

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"Two friends instead of one," said Vaugon gladly. "M. le Comte le Plessis, I am happy to present M. Cyrano de Bergerac, and M. d'Artagnan."

"If this keeps up, we'll have an army!" and Plessis laughed as they shook hands. In his manner, d'Artagnan showed instant comprehension of the comte's identity. Cyrano was slower, but the girl's next words plainly revealed the truth.

"So you ride with us, gentlemen? I give thanks—it's all I can give save my friendship; that is already yours. Sit down, sit down! Time enough for food and drink."

D'Artagnan caught the eye of Vaugon, made a slight gesture, and Vaugon comprehended.

"Cyrano," he said, "I leave the road of evasion to your wits. Confer with M. le Plessis, while I have a word apart with d'Artagnan, by your leave."

"Eh?" Cyrano turned. His challenging, black-browed gaze drove at the cadet. "Oh, all right! Ask him for whom he carries an order of arrest, while you're about it."

With this, Cyrano turned again to the girl. Vaugon sensed a certain definite antagonism, and scented it anew in the manner of d'Artagnan, as he accompanied the latter to a table across the room.

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The host brought wine and cups, and they could speak freely.

"Well?" asked Vaugon, his gaze on that of d'Artagnan. "It seems there's some tension in the air—yet we parted friends."

"We are friends," responded d'Artagnan. A slight flush mounted his cheek. "The best proof is that I'm going to lay my cards before you—aye, on this very table! Cyrano suspects my errand and misconstrues it. The fact is, I have been sent to arrest a woman who is masquerading as a man."

Vaugon frowned. "What? Surely not Plessis—"

"Yonder? Oh, not a bit of it." D'Artagnan smiled whimsically. "I gave Cyrano my word that this errand was not concerned with Mlle de Closset, nor with him. Look you, comrade! I've only one aim in life—to rise! Here's frank speech. There are two ways one may follow this ambition; by the road of duty, or the road of women. Some men chose the one, some the other. I choose both! And here, death of my life, I'm in conflict on both heads! It's a devil of a predicament."

Vaugon sipped at his wine. The other went on quietly.

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"Richelieu rules France, but Mazarin has his fingers clenched in the old lion's mane, my friend. That Italian is a sharp man, twists the cardinal to his notion—a good one to work with, this Mazarin. Well, the cardinal thinks that one of his personal enemies, a woman, a traitress, a spy, is going about France disguised as a man. Further, he thinks this man carries a passport naming him *Sieur Nicolas Vaugon*."

"Eh?" Vaugon started, and his grey eyes widened. "Is this a jest, *d'Artagnan*?"

"It's damnable earnest!" *D'Artagnan* flung out his hands, then leaned forward. "Absurd? Of course it's absurd! All tragedy is absurd. I suspect Mazarin's hand in this, too. It may be your name came up, and to avert suspicion from your real identity, your real errand, crafty Mazarin swung the cardinal into this false trail. At all events, someone reported our dinner at the Pinecone, and I was summoned as knowing your face."

D'Artagnan emptied his cup, wiped his mustache, and continued.

"Richelieu questioned me, and learned nothing, I assure you. He had already sent out men in one direction—devil take it, I can't tell you more than

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duty permits! There's a line drawn by duty which friendship can't pass—"

Vaugon nodded, alertly. "Understood. Tell me what you can."

"I've been sent to find you, as they know you headed south. When you head for a certain city, or when you exchange any letters—I'm to seize the letters and arrest you. Meantime, I'm to give you free rein, on condition that I bring you ultimately to Richelieu, by arrest, guile, or otherwise. You see? Up to a certain point, I'm a free agent."

"I see. Richelieu doesn't suspect my real identity?"

"Not in the least, upon my word! He thinks *Sieur Vaugon* is some female spy, or some lady whom he has exiled—I don't know who you're supposed to be. Now, I've nothing to do with *M. le Plessis*, who of course is our *m'amselle* in disguise, or with *Cyrano*. My errand lies solely with you. There are my cards, comrade, and damned if I know how to play them!"

Vaugon frowned thoughtfully.

"This is a devilish imbroglio!" he mused. "If Richelieu knew I was a man—"

"Easily proven," and *d'Artagnan* grinned. "But

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orders are orders—I'm to bring *Sieur Vaugon* to him."

"Hm!" *Vaugon* met those laughing yet keenly shrewd eyes, and knew he had no loophole of evasion—except frankness. "And meantime, you're to accompany this *Vaugon*?"

"Awaiting my time. And I'm to keep him unharmed."

"Excellent." *Vaugon* broke into a laugh and held out his hand. "Then carry out your orders. When it comes to arresting me, that'll be another matter to discuss. Until then, we're comrades. Agreed?"

"Agreed." *D'Artagnan* gave him a firm grip. "You'll not try to give me the slip, I'll not take you unawares. We ride as comrades—faith of a gentleman!"

"Faith of a gentleman!" echoed *Vaugon* gravely.

"Then let's rejoin our friends—and I hope you don't head for the danger point."

They returned to the other table. *Vaugon* caught a sharp look from *Cyrano*, and clapped the guardsman heartily on the shoulder.

"We make four," he announced. "*M. d'Artagnan* rides with us—our cause is his. Now whither shall we ride? For Sedan?"

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Only Cyrano, who missed nothing, caught the sharp glint in d'Artagnan's eyes at this name. Plessis shook his head.

"Not for Sedan," he said. "The roads are closed that way. We've concluded, Vaugon, our best chance would be to cut back across the Orleans road, and either make southwest for the Forest of Ivelines, or else north around Paris for Pontoise."

D'Artagnan relaxed, and reached for the wine.

"As you like," said Vaugon indifferently. "But we've no definite objective, except to kill time and stay out of sight, so why try to map out a route? Let's get across the Orleans highway first and put danger behind us, then follow our luck. If by any chance things get too hot, we can always double back to Paris—the best of all places in which to hide."

"At a pinch, yes," agreed Cyrano. "Then we strike first for Palaiseau, beyond Lonjumeau—and make further plans there. To your taste, M. d'Artagnan?"

"Admirably!" said the latter, twirling his mustache. He lifted his cup with a flourish. "To our good comrade, Comte le Plessis! By the way," he

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added, when the toast was drunk, "how are we off for money?"

"Mazarin provided me," said Vaugon.

"I provided myself," and Plessis laughed as he tapped his pocket.

"Richelieu provided me," said d'Artagnan, whereat Plessis gave him a glance of sharp astonishment. Cyrano made a grimace.

"Naked I came into the world," he intoned, "and naked I go out of it. For me, the lord will provide—thanks to a cardinal and an Italian abbé! We've an extra horse, too."

"Then sell mine at Lonjumeau," said Plessis, rising. "Finish your wine, friends—Vaugon and I will get our beasts ready."

Vaugon accompanied him to the courtyard. In the eager, nervous stride of Plessis, in the too-soft accents, he could distinguish the woman; but in little else. Once outside, Plessis turned quickly to him, after sending a groom for the horses.

"Who's this d'Artagnan? He spoke of Richelieu—"

"Who sent him to arrest me." Vaugon laughed and explained briefly, as they waited. "You see? The great cardinal is caught in a net of errors. He

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thinks *Sieur Nicolas Vaugon* is some woman in disguise, and wants to catch her. There's no peril in it for you. If anything goes amiss with me, if that passport has drawn me into danger instead of lifting me above it, *Cyrano* will take care of my mission. Meantime, *d'Artagnan* can be trusted."

"Yes, but not forgotten," murmured *Plessis*. "What would happen if you were arrested and taken to *Richelieu*?"

Vaugon smiled amusedly as he pictured such a contingency.

"Faith, I don't know who'd be more confounded—the cardinal or I! What woman could he take me for, I wonder?"

The violet eyes danced merrily. "Whom, indeed? *Marie de Medici*, perhaps, or *Mme. de Chevreuse*, or any of a dozen others! Come along, then. We four have no secrets, it appears, so here are the horses and the road's awaiting us. *Hola, comrades!* All ready."

No secrets, indeed! In the sudden flash of her eyes, in the nuance of her voice, *Vaugon* read the truth. *Berville* must have imparted to this girl what he knew or suspected about *Vaugon's* identity. Well, what matter? With a shrug, *Vaugon* turned to pay

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the inn-keeper his score. None the less, abode with him the sensation as of a cold hand upon his neck. A chance meeting had shown how his secret, supposedly so secure, might yet be flashed out before the whole world without warning.

A few minutes more, and all four of them were jogging along a hillside path for Grand Vaux, Epinay and the western highway, which crossed the Orleans road at Lonjumeau. Plessis and d'Artagnan, with the spare horse, rode ahead, Cyrano followed with Vaugon. The mists of an early morning had not dissipated, but on the contrary had continued and were thickening into a blanket of fog hanging close upon hills and valley.

"A splendid cavalier, this little lady of ours!" observed Cyrano. "Mordious! The game may go well enough, comrade!"

Vaugon nodded, eyeing the lithe cloaked figure of Plessis with approval. The girl made a very proper cavalier, to any casual eye.

"Hm! See if you know such a man as this," and Vaugon told of his meeting with Berville and how the latter had ridden away hurriedly. "Who the devil could the fellow be? No ordinary person—some high noble at least?"

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"Faith, I don't know all Paris," said Cyrano. "Never heard the name, and can't place the description, unless it's the Duc d'Orleans—but that's nonsense. So that's how you know the eastern roads were watched? Berville did us a good turn there. If he's an enemy of the cardinal, we needn't fear him. What I don't like is having d'Artagnan with us."

"We've made truce," and Vaugon detailed the agreement. Cyrano, thus getting full details of d'Artagnan's mission for the first time, sniffed scornfully.

"Truce! He's a real Gascon, that one; look out for yourself! A gentleman? Of course, but a shrewd and devilish sharp young man! And with a supreme eye to his own fortune. On the road hither, I got to know the rascal, and I'll wager a pistole he's making love to Plessis this moment. Comrade, we're not sitting in a tavern—we're on the road to death and fortune, and devil take the hindmost! Gentleman my eye! I've nothing to lose, everything to gain, by sticking to you. D'Artagnan doesn't give a hang for anything except winning his own play, so look to it! He'll get on in the world, that one."

Vaugon refused to accept this view. "Leave him

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to me. All the future hangs on incident, so don't force it. If I'm put out of the game, you take Plessis and carry on to the end without me."

"Aye; likely enough, too," said Cyrano gloomily. "Fleury is no fool. We'll run risks at Lonjumeau, if that cat St. Aubin is after us, but we're well ahead of any alarm from Fleury and the escape of the girl. So forward!"

Having thus unloaded his burden of woe, Cyrano promptly swung to the other extreme, and when the four riders clattered into the paved highway at Epinay, he was matching campaign yarns with d'Artagnan in a species of wild gusto.

In all he did, Cyrano was not only intense, but went to astonishing extremes. D'Artagnan, too, flung off his sober air, matched youth with youth, and Vaugon found himself catching the contagion. Within an hour all constraint had vanished, and if some of Cyrano's jests were broad, Plessis laughed as heartily as the others. It was not a squeamish age by a good deal.

Early in the afternoon they rode into Lonjumeau. When they perforce halted at the post tavern, came an incident to more than justify Vaugon's confidence in the Gascon. The valley of the Yvette was thick

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with fog, the town was shrouded with it. The four had just dismounted; Cyrano and Plessis were at the inn door, Vaugon and d'Artagnan were directing the feed of the horses, when into the inn-yard poured a number of riders, most of them cavalry officers from the regiment quartered here.

Vaugon caught one startled howl, and turned to find St. Aubin and two officers at his side.

"Here's the one who fought Fleury!" cried the noble. "There at the door—he's the one who killed Breuil—seize them all for duelling—quick!"

"Your names, messieurs?" demanded an officer of Vaugon.

"And authority." Vaugon drew out his passport. "If you'll have the goodness to silence this yelping fool, here's a document to speak for me."

St. Aubin broke into curses. The officer, glancing over the passport, changed countenance as he got its import.

"M. Vaugon, you are under His Majesty's seal—and yet—"

"And yet," spoke out d'Artagnan, opening his cloak to show his uniform scarf, "one of His Majesty's officers refuses to acknowledge the royal

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signature? I must say, monsieur, I find this very singular, to say the least!"

The officer bowed. "Gentlemen, I do not refuse. I salute!" he said, and turned away. "Come, St. Aubin—you've been too hasty in this affair."

They were gone into the mist. D'Artagnan caught Vaugon's arm.

"Take your time! Eat, drink, bait the horses and ourselves—they'll not bother us. We're safe in the town, at least. Once out of it—well, that's to be seen!"

Securing a table in the tavern, the four made light of the occurrence.

"Bah!" exclaimed Cyrano grandly. "The passport has saved us, from the cavalry at least. Now St. Aubin will scurry round and raise a few local gentlemen to get after us, and we can't hope to throw them off without hard riding. D'Artagnan, a health to you! We seal friendship afresh. Now, if my invention were but perfected, how easy to evade!"

"What invention?" demanded Plessis, laughing. "An invisible cloak?"

"Aye, wherewith to reach the moon! Here's the meat—at it!" Cyrano attacked his platter, and spoke between bites. "Certain laws of physics, you

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comprehend? Smoke rises, being lighter than air; gas or hot air rises, for the same reason. Regard, then! Make a great bag of silk or other light substance, fill it with smoke or gas—what will happen? It will rise—curse me if it won't! Now attach a box to this bag, and climb into the box. If box and man aren't too heavy, they'll rise too. The moon's in sight, comrades! Up!"

"A madman's dream!" laughed d'Artagnan. "Tell me when you test the invention, and I'll be there to preach the funeral sermon."

"Devil a bit of it!" said Cyrano stoutly. "I've gone over the figures carefully—it will work, I assure you! All I need is enough money to try it out."

"And that's as far away as the moon," said Vaugon, chuckling.

"Jest away, scoffers!" cried Cyrano. "You'll wish you had my moon-bag before we're a league out of town, though! That coxcomb St. Aubin will be after us. Fleury is probably at the Chateau de Closset now—in another twenty-four hours they'll know everything and the whole country will be raised against us. Swordplay ahead, comrades—so drink

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today, and let tomorrow take care of itself. Who's going to sell that extra horse?"

"Try the inn-keeper," said Plessis. "This is the post tavern, and the best place."

"Didn't your friend Berville," said Vaugon, when Cyrano departed with d'Artagnan, "come westward? Then he must have come through here."

Plessis shrugged. "Perhaps. He daren't pause in any town where there are soldiers, though—his face is too well known. His danger is less from actual pursuit, than from chance recognition."

"He must be devilish well known, then—a great person of the court, at least!"

"He is," and Plessis regarded Vaugon with merry gaze. "Come, you'll know some day! We may even meet him, though I doubt it, as he's headed now for the frontier."

The horse sold, the money paid, they ordered the horses made ready. They saw or heard no more of St. Aubin, though a number of officers were in the inn-room. With small loss of time they had mounted and were once more on their way. They would have a clear field ahead, once they got through town and on the road to Palaiseau.

Across the bridge, past the gates unhindered, the

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four swung into a fast trot. The fog lessened somewhat as they gained the higher ground, yet continued as a thick, cold mist veiling everything. With luck, they should reach Palaiseau for the night.

Here was a good league of riding over upland road to the village of Champlan, with never a hamlet in between, scarce a struggling farm—all these lay leftward toward the river. They had covered half the distance when toward them through the mist loomed up a galloping horse, riderless yet saddled. The animal clattered past with a snort and a fleck of white foam, and was gone.

“Fright and blood!” exclaimed d’Artagnan, twisting in his saddle to stare after the vanishing shape. “Ride ahead, Cyrano—army tactics here!”

“Right,” replied Cyrano, and spurred off into the mist ahead.

They followed him more slowly, priming their pistols afresh. Vaugon cursed the fog which prevented any sight of the country or road. His glimpse of that riderless horse had brought a sense of familiarity; he had seen the beast somewhere, and recently, yet the clue eluded him. He struggled with memory—then came peril pressing in to divert him.

From the road behind he caught a faint thrum-

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ming throb, the clatter and pound of hooves galloping in unison. He touched d'Artagnan's arm.

"Pursuit—hear it?"

The cadet listened, nodded. At this instant, from the mist ahead, broke a pistol-shot and the bellowing voice of Cyrano.

"Assassins! To me, comrades—assassins!"

"In between us, Plessis!" snapped d'Artagnan. "Close in, Vaugon. Forward!"

The three horses plunged on abreast. Shadowy figures took shape in the mist. Sword in one hand, pistol in the other, Vaugon stared—glimpsed two men against a huge oak-tree beside the road. They were afoot, hemmed in by half a dozen cavaliers, among whom Cyrano's horse was plunging madly. Even as yells of alarm rang up, one of the men by the tree crumpled and fell forward, a bullet through his head.

"Vive le Cardinal!" went up a shout.

"Vive le Roi!" retorted d'Artagnan, and the three struck headlong into the tumult.

Pistols banged, men yelled, steel rasped. Vaugon found an opening, drew rein—and saw that the man against the tree was the Chevalier de Berville. He emptied his pistol into a rider thrusting down at

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Berville, then was borne afar by a rush. For half a moment it was all a mad, blind mêlée of plunging horses and cursing men, and Vaugon damned the wild recklessness of Cyrano. The dead man by the tree was the messenger Armand—the chevalier himself had now caught a riderless horse and was scrambling for the saddle.

Sharp amazement at such a meeting swept Vaugon. He saw Plessis at one side, turned his horse—and then, like a thunderbolt, another band of riders burst from the mist and came smashing headlong into the confusion. St. Aubin's sharp yelp showed the pursuers were come up.

What with the cloaking fog, the bursting pistol-shots, the ring of swords, there was no time for question or reply—the scene became a wild riot of insensate, panic-struck fighting without rhyme or reason. A fallen horse blocked the road, others piled up across its body, and here gathered a swirl of striking figures.

"Aside, Plessis!" he cried, shouldering the other horse aside with his own beast, engaging his own blade with that of a cavalier—a scarred rascal who grinned and lunged viciously. The horses plunged as the blades clicked and clung—then Vaugon felt

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his lithe, slender steel drive home, saw his opponent lean over and clutch at the saddle, saw him go away into the mist and be swallowed up.

Vaugon turned, searching Plessis—and a sudden harsh scream was wrenched from him. He felt the deep bite of steel, felt the blade go into him from behind. A shrill, fox-like yelp and he twisted to see St. Aubin at his stirrup with contorted, exultant features. Only dimly did Vaugon realize how his own rapier swept around and drove in. He sent the point home on shortened blade and followed it to the very hilt—followed it until his fist touched the face of St. Aubin, as the latter clutched his throat and went shrieking backward.

The wrench of his sword almost unseated Vaugon, yet it came clear in his hand. Beside him loomed the shape of Plessis, face white, eyes blazing large. Vaugon put up his sword, caught at the other's bridle.

"Out of it, out of it!" he cried, but his voice was very weak. His spurs drove in, and the two horses swerved aside, dashed from the road into a field, emerged from the lessening fury of the tumult.

A tree loomed before them, then Vaugon's memory of events went blank.

CHAPTER VIII

V AUGON wakened to strange peace, after that horribly confused nightmare of fog and men gone mad.

True, he was still in fog, but now he lay on the ground, his head pillowed in the lap of Plessis, while Berville completed the work of bandaging his side and then held a flask of cognac to his lips. The fiery stuff brought him around fast enough, and warmed him.

"Not dead, then!" he said, and smiled.

"Far from it," returned Berville, and wiped blood from his jeweled fingers with an odd expression of distaste. "We must get on—they'll be searching. What a devil of a scrimmage, eh? Here, give me your arm."

Vaugon was presently on his feet, leaning on Plessis, while Berville brought up the three-horses.

"Our comrades?" he queried.

"Heaven knows!" and Plessis shrugged. His face was thin-seeming and strained, the violet eyes large. "I thought you dead—met the chevalier——"

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Berville came up to them, laughing. "What a re-encounter it was, eh? Those cardinalists had us done for—one of them, a scarred rusty-faced rascal, had once been in my service, and recognized me. Poor Armand's dead. Then you came—and after you, who?"

"St. Aubin and some friends in pursuit of us," said Vaugon. "Cyrano and I were recognized in town—vengeance for killing Breuil. Well, St. Aubin's dead now, and so is your rusty-faced rogue, I think."

"Good news, then," said Berville. "You were making westward too, eh? This means hiding for us all. Now—can you get into the saddle? Steady, now—your arm——"

Vaugon was helped up, and settled into the saddle. St. Aubin's blade had torn his side, slipping along his ribs, but had not thrust into him. A moment more, and he was riding through the mist, the others on either side. They were off the road, enveloped in the ghastly silence of thick fog, apparently alone in the world.

Cyrano and d'Artagnan—well, whatever had happened to them, worry would do no good. Vaugon, weak with loss of blood, sank into a dazed coma as the endless ride continued, hour upon hour. He

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dimly realized they had come upon a country road, and that Berville appeared to know their whereabouts and to have some definite goal in view; but he took no great interest in it all.

Even the strange trick of fate which had again flung them into contact with Berville quite failed to arouse Vaugon. He plodded on, head hanging, conscious yet in a daze, all his faculties concentrated on keeping in the saddle. Little by little he was failing, and he fought against the weakness.

The chevalier appeared entirely untroubled, entirely sure of himself. Plessis begged him to ride on and leave them; the girl stated truly enough that she could take Vaugon to some country auberge where they would be safe. Berville only laughed at her.

"Bah! I left you because my company was dangerous for you—now that we're together for the time, my company will get you safety and good bestowal. Besides, I can't go on as I am. They'll know I'm at large, will have my description, will search every road. Comte de Fleury will be hotfoot after you and me both. I'll get hold of a monk's garb and use that," and he guffawed as though the notion were highly amusing.

"Where are you going, then?" demanded Plessis.

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"To the Tour de Gisy—a long chance but our best hope. Although he hates me, although I've wronged him and bitter things lie between us in the past, Sieur de Gisy will aid us—or rather, you! Leave it to me, cousin. There's humiliation in it, and you know how I love such a thing, but better humiliation here in the woods than in the Palais Cardinal!"

Vaugon thought the chevalier was out of his head, and laughed hollowly.

"Both of you go on, leave me," he muttered. "I've failed you, Plessis—I'll be safe enough at any tavern——"

"Because a coward stabbed you in the back? Devil take me if I'll leave you!" swore Plessis, and reached over to clap him on the arm. "Brace up, comrade! We'll beat the red minister yet!"

They rode on. Presently Vaugon sank again into coma, for the bandage had slipped and his wound was bleeding slowly, steadily, seepingly. He said nothing of this to the others—what matter?

He remembered little more until, late in the afternoon, they were out of the mist and riding through woods red with sunset, keen with biting wind, black snow-clouds massing up from north and east. The sun was gone when the road brought them to a

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strange old turreted building, half in ruins, standing solitary where once had been a great chateau and open park. A thread of smoke went up from the building, and as they approached it, a dog howled. Vaugon roused himself. The cold had stopped his wound, but he was half frozen and in much pain.

A massive iron-bound door was flung back, and before them appeared a surly-faced man.

"Tell the *Sieur de Gisy* he has guests," said the chevalier, not dismounting. "Two fugitives and a wounded man."

"We take no guests here," said the servitor churlishly. "Go die of your wounds, for all we care. If you know my master, you know none gain admittance here."

"But I gain it," said Berville, and took from his finger the same ring Vaugon had borne from the queen. "Give him this in token."

The man took it, re-entered, slammed the door, left them standing there. In two minutes he came back hastily, bowed, and advanced.

"Enter, guests," he said. "I'll take the horses. There are no other servants. Go into the room on the right, where a fire is burning. My master will join you presently."

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"Aye," muttered Berville, as he supported Vaugon, "he'll join us to taunt me! Well, I'll have a surprise for him."

Snow was beginning to fall as they entered, Berville helping the stumbling Vaugon, to whom all this was an incomprehensible, fantastic dream. There was fantasy inside, too, for they came into a huge sombre room lighted by candelabra and a wide fireplace, and Vaugon saw great paintings of handsome women on the walls, as he sank into a chair and sat half conscious.

Then he was aware of a man bowing, bringing Berville's fingers to his lips, and this drew a laugh from him—only a woman, or a prince of the blood, could exact such a greeting. Was Berville, then, the king's brother, the Duc d'Orleans? At his laugh they turned and stared. But Vaugon's head had sunk again on his breast, his eyes closed.

"You do me too much honor," said the Lord of Gisy, his voice very bitter. Not half so bitter as were his eyes, however. From his gaunt bearded face they looked upon Berville with a cold and gloomy stare of hatred. "Too much honor by far! These fifteen years you have forgotten me, after vilely betraying my honor and my love——"

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"Why, that's true enough!" Berville faced him steadily, white-faced in the ruddy firelight, but unflinching. "True enough, Raoul de Gisy! I don't hide behind excuses."

"Then how dare you come here asking my aid?" The cold voice deepened. "Aid? By the lord, I'll give you nothing, sell you nothing, not if you bartered yourself in exchange!"

It certainly must be Monsieur, thought Vaugon dimly—Monsieur, the royal prince who had betrayed all of his associates. Yet the Duc d'Orleans was a coward, a vile craven, and this Berville was anything but a coward.

"You're not the devil, to barter for souls," and the chevalier laughed a little. "No, Raoul, if alone I'd never have come here. It's for others that I humiliate myself."

"Aye, you were always generous enough," said Sieur de Gisy in a grudging voice. "Generous with gold, with love, with friends, with crime and intrigue—never with honor! Why should I do anything for your friends? Richelieu is after you? Then let the damned cardinal take you, for all I care! He has taken every friend I had in the past——"

"Aye, Raoul, he took your best friend," said Ber-

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ville, "and that was eight years ago. And I wronged you—that's true enough. Today, with two friends, with the roads searched for us all, I turn to you and ask aid. Why?"

Sieur de Gisy laughed harshly, and his eyes glittered like ice in sunlight.

"Let Richelieu have your friends, traitors like yourself!" he retorted. "I'd not turn over my hand to save them from him, much as I hate him! Shelter, hospitality, aid—go seek them elsewhere, you and yours, or die in the snow. It's all one to me."

Vaugon was conscious of sudden light upon his face. He looked up to see Berville holding a candelabra above him so it illumined his profile.

"All one to you, Raoul?" Berville's voice was half mocking. "Is it all one to you, indeed? Then, look! You knew, and I knew too, a man who bore this selfsame visage, feature for feature, even to the mole by the ear——"

Vaugon stirred, anger piercing him, rousing him.

"Blast you!" he cried thickly, and struggled to reach his feet, his hand feebly lashing out at Berville. "Devil take you, I warned you before to drop that subject——"

Pain stabbed through him, and he had fainted.

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It all came back to him afterward in disconnected fragments, like morsels of an uncanny dream. He found himself lying in a huge testered bed, the sun glittering on snow outside his window. At his side was Berville, upholding his head, feeding him broth from a bowl.

"You!" Remembrance stirred in Vaugon.
"You——"

"Peace, my friend." The bright blue eyes of the chevalier were no longer merry, but sad and clouded. "I bought aid for you at some small cost—forget all else. I'm leaving at once, for two days are gone and I must be on the road. You're all right, except that strength lacks. Plessis is here——"

"But I know you now!" said Vaugon, and at this a flash came into the blue eyes above. "The king's brother—Monsieur! That's who you are!"

The blue eyes widened on him, and then, to his amazement, Berville broke into a clear ringing laugh and rose.

"No, no, comrade—too much honor there, and too little! Farewell. A safe journey to you, and I pray we don't meet again—yet one never knows. Your secret is safe with me, as with Gisy. Trust

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him. My own case is desperate, and I dare not linger another hour. Farewell!"

He waved his jeweled hand and went from the room, Vaugon looking after him with troubled and wondering gaze.

A long while after, the Lord of Gisy came to the bedside and stood there looking down at Vaugon.

"I owe you thanks," said the latter, "for hospitality——"

"You owe me nothing," said Sieur de Gisy, and those bitter icy eyes were anything but kindly. "Is it true, as I hear from your companions, that you do not take your own name again but desire to be Sieur Vaugon?"

"Quite true. Why?"

"Then I think the less of you," came the harsh, uncompromising words. "Once, my dearest friend was the Duc de Montmorenci. That you should willingly give up your name, the proudest heritage in France, is past understanding; but you give it up, and with it my respect. For the sake of old times, this house is yours. I ask no questions, I desire to see you no more. When you wish to leave, then leave. That you should renounce your name and

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heritage is an insult to the dead and to the living. Farewell."

Sieur de Gisy strode out of the room, and Vaugon saw him never again; after this, the man must have remained straitly in his own chamber. His words left hurt enough behind, however.

Some little while after, Plessis came in, sat down on the bedside, and gripped Vaugon's hand.

"No fever? You're doing excellently, comrade! Tomorrow you'll be up, and the day after we may hope to get off. Your wound's no great matter, and we've plenty of fresh meat to bring back your strength."

"Has Berville gone?"

"Yes. Just now."

"What lies between him and M. de Gisy?"

"The past." The violet eyes clouded. "I can only guess—and it's not my secret. I think the chevalier once did a great wrong to our host, who seems to have lived here like a recluse for a long while. He's a strange man!"

"A harsh and bitter man," said Vaugon, closing his eyes for an instant. "He was just now here—his passing was like a curse."

He knew now there was no secret between them

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regarding himself, and told Plessis what the Lord of Gisy had just said to him. For response, he had a warm handgrip.

"Dear comrade, take no thought to him!" said Plessis earnestly. "That was pride and caste speaking—chiefly pride. And he was very wrong about it. Surely I have no blame for you! You have chosen to follow a difficult path, and if it comes to a good ending, so much the better for you—believe me, the king will not forget it, if we can manage this affair of ours! Every man to his own future. Gisy lives in the past."

Vaugon smiled. "I can almost imagine you a girl again, now," he said. "When I first saw you, it was a disappointment. I thought you so fragile, so merely pretty, so——"

"So cursed useless, eh?" Plessie broke into gay laughter. "You never thought I'd prove a comrade, eh? Well, live and learn. And do you know what I thought of you?"

Vaugon looked up into the dancing violet eyes. "What, then?"

"Exactly the same thing. A pretty doll of a courtier, some mincing friend of Cinq-Mars put in to stop the gap—a useless, inefficient gentleman! Well,

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live and learn. We'll get on all right, comrade—pity we've lost your friend Cyrano. He's a live rascal."

"With a loose enough tongue at times."

"Well, what the devil do you take me for?" The violet eyes widened at him almost angrily. "I've not been at court for five years, and then I was a mere child. Why, I've been riding, fencing, coursing about the country enjoying life—lord, lord, these dolls of Paris!" Plessis flung out his arms with an air of exasperation. "What's a woman for, to paint and powder, simper, lend her body to a man in dark places, play at intrigue and admiration—faugh! What I do, is done before all the world, and plague take those who don't like it! No court and Paris for me, thank you. I enjoy life too much to dissimulate it behind any woman's mask."

Vaugon laughed out. "Good for you, comrade! I've met women like you in England—not like you, either. None with just your qualities——"

"A truce to compliments," Plessis started up. "I forgot your wine—a rare vintage our host sent along. He's plenty of it, so we'll share the bottle together. Our horses are well cared for, not a soul has appeared, and as soon as you can ride we'll start

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out and go to traveling again. And no bad luck this time, I trust!"

Instead of another two days, however, four had passed ere Vaugon and Plessis could ride forth of the Tour de Gisy, since lost strength was made up but slowly.

During these four days, their host never appeared. The surly servitor attended them, and with Vaugon lingered heavily the dark words of *Sieur de Gisy*. None the less, he knew the man wrong. It were utter mad folly to claim a name and title suppressed by Richelieu, to which his very claim might well be contested by others.

Times had changed, the past twenty years had seen the princes broken, exiled or dead, and Vaugon was firmly convinced that the part of wisdom lay in looking ahead, not behind. The grim cardinal himself would die ere long, yet this could not undo the changes his hand had wrought upon France.

During these days a fierce wind-storm raged, bringing no fresh snow but sweeping bare the roads and heaping white drifts in long windrows among the trees. Of Plessis, Vaugon saw much in this time. Their rooms adjoined, they had only each other for company, and their friendship attained to

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swift intimacy that held no secrets. Thus, Plessis for the first time learned how Vaugon had left the Bastille to be pitched headlong into a new identity, and of that evening at the Pinecone tavern.

Vaugon, in turn, not only learned more of his present errand, but cleared up a point that had puzzled him and Cyrano alike—that of the time element.

"A queer comedy of errors, all of it!" mused Plessis, staring into the fire as they talked, one cold night. "This Comte de Fleury is a reckless, head-strong man. He got into huge gambling debts, went to the money-lenders—you see? Richelieu could not turn over to him any such staggering sum as he had lost, for the cardinal is too closely watched, too narrowly bayed by his foes. Instead, Richelieu arranged a marriage with me. Even the king was forced to assent outwardly. On the fifteenth of December at latest, Fleury must meet his engagements; if my money lacks, Richelieu will have to turn elsewhere. So there you are."

"But your disappearance will raise a scandal!" said Vaugon. Plessis turned, and gave him a queer smile.

"A scandal—me? I've made scandals enough, through wanting to be free; that's no novelty! Once

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I get to court, too, I become my own mistress—the king gives up his wardship. He's promised it to me, through the queen, and the papers are already made out but had to await the outcome of this Fleury matter. Richelieu will find another rich match for the count, and it'll blow over."

"What sort of scandals have you raised?" asked Vaugon, smiling.

Plessis chuckled. "Enough! Last spring that lout of a Baron de Launay, whose lands adjoin mine, thought he could grab one of my best farms. Having seigneurial rights myself, with those of high and low justice to boot, I hanged two of his bailiffs and whipped the rest of his men home. Then Launay tried to get the farm by marrying me, which was worse, and one market-day in Ste. Genevieve I tumbled him in the mud. Well, after that I joined some Rhineland pilgrims last summer and went with them to Mont St. Michel on pilgrimage, and had a grand time. Things like that. Everybody thinks I'm mad—but I enjoy myself!"

Scandal, indeed! Vaugon laughed heartily.

During these days he gained gradual insight into the girl, and wondered at how poor had been his first judgment of her. She might say or do startling

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things, yet one must seek twice for reason behind word or deed, and seeking, would find one. She looked at life frankly, inquiringly; not with the bored frankness of Paris which only served to spice licentious thought, but with a spirit high above any fear of evil or of contamination.

Nor did she love to play the man. As she admitted freely, she longed for pretties, for the gew-gaws and laces of a woman, but had put them away because they meant servitude to custom. They were chains.

"I want no trammels—I'm a rebel!" she cried, laughing yet passionate enough. "To do what other people think you should do, to rule your life so that nobody might look at you in holy horror—bah! That's not life, it's stifling tyranny. Mind you, it's only because I'm a girl, too! I could get a husband, shift him off, go to Paris and act as I like—that would be all right, even if I played street courtesan! Plenty of them have done it and do it every day. But because I'm unmarried, because I won't sell my body to gain freedom—faugh! Well, some day I'll get to England, where a woman can be free and do as she likes."

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"She never can, anywhere," said Vaugon slowly.
"None of us can, comrade."

"Your friend Cyrano can!" she flashed out, her eyes dark and stormy. "We talked about it. He can!"

"And die in the gutter like a sick dog—ask him some day, when the mask's off, No, we can't defy the world, beyond certain limits——"

"Well, I shall! And that settles it." With this, she flung away.

So the days passed, until, on the morning they left the Tour de Gisy, Vaugon gained a new and unexpected light on his companion. They had broken their fast, the servant reported their horses saddled and waiting; and together they came to the entrance of the half-ruined old structure.

There Vaugon gave the servant a gold-piece, or attempted to give it—he met with blank refusal.

"At least," he said, "tell your master that I owe him much, and we would express our gratitude and say farewell."

The servant shrugged and left them. Presently he returned.

"My master says to tell you," he reported, without emotion, "that he has no words for you, and does

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not accept gratitude from one who is a recreant coward and a traitor to a great name."

Vaugon caught his breath at this—it burned in him, far more bitterly than his half-healed wound. He stood wordless, frozen, the hurt of it in his eyes. Then, swiftly and suddenly, Plessis caught his hand, and he found her lips warm against his cheek.

"There's to take the sting from proud injustice, comrade!" she cried softly, a flush in her cheeks, impulsive warmth in her eyes. "Come, mount and ride—the future lies ahead, and we're comrades!"

So they mounted and rode off among the trees, while the iron-bound door slammed shut as though blocking out all the world from the Tour de Gisy and its lonely occupant.

CHAPTER IX

UPON one side of the royal forest of Verrieres, a scant few leagues from Paris, was the king's pavilion and hunting-lodge. Upon the other was a smaller patch of forest, known as the Wood of the Hanged Wolf. Forest and wood lay just off the southern route to Versailles, and were separated by a road that ran through a tiny village. The one auberge of the place was, naturally, the Loup Pendu—the Hanged Wolf.

Upon a brisk December afternoon, a somewhat tattered cavalier on a very fine horse rode into this village from the south. Despite the fresh red scar across his cheek where a bullet had burnéd the flesh, none who had seen that face with its fierce hawk-nose and brooding liquid eyes would ever fail to recognize Cyrano de Bergerac the second time. Coming into the village, he pulled his broken-plumed beaver down over his eyes and drew his horse to a sudden halt.

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It was a Sunday. Into the open village church to the left were flocking a number of folk, and three persons had caught the attention of Cyrano. Beside an austere, black-clad man, obviously the village notary, walked a demure and quite pretty young woman, but her eyes were neither upon her lord and master nor upon the church entrance ahead. They were all for the cloaked gallant over to one side, a very handsome young gallant who twirled his mustaches with an air, and who made certain cabalistic signals to which she responded very cautiously. All three filed into the church, and Cyrano loosed his reins with a chuckle and headed for the tavern.

"So, my fine d'Artagnan, at least I've run you to earth, and at your tricks again! Hm—shows I was right in coming here, and you're on the same scent. If Vaugon doubles back toward Paris, he's bound to pass this way, and you're evidence that he's not yet passed. So forward, my Pegasus! Repose awaits us."

Cyrano dismounted in the inn yard. The host looked very doubtful when he eyed the rider, very hopeful when he eyed the horse. Cyrano chucked a gold piece into his inquiring palm.

"There's an earnest," he said, "I hope to meet

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some friends here—one of them, M. d'Artagnan of His Majesty's guards——”

“Ah, a friend of M. le Comte d'Artagnan!” exclaimed the host, thawing and bowing low, while Cyrano chuckled afresh at hearing his friend's new title. “Welcome, monsieur! He has been here for a week past—a gallant young man, indeed! I have myself looked after his wound——”

“Eh? He's wounded?” asked Cyrano.

“A scratch in the left arm, a mere nothing, m'sieu, now well healing. Will you enter?”

“I have that intention,” said Cyrano dryly. “Prepare a room for me; I may remain for a day or two. Send up my saddlebags. Meantime, have you any good Chinon, for example?”

The host beamed and rubbed his hands. “The best in the world, m'sieu! The *cru* of '28, which M. Cinq-Mars himself is pleased to drink whenever he comes here! He may be here today, for there is a royal hunt in the forest, yonder.”

“Too good for that rascal by far,” said Cyrano with a lordly air. “Two bottles as a starter, while you're preparing a dinner fit to be offered an intimate friend of Comte d'Harcourt. You comprehend?”

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"The first epicure of Paris! M'sieu, I assure you we shall exert ourselves. You are, no doubt, from the royal hunt—of the court, perhaps?"

"If I were," and Cyrano laughed, "I would have eaten since yesterday. As it is, I'm cold, famished, weary and devilish thirsty. So to work!"

He entered the empty auberge. By the side of the fireplace was a small table and settle with high back and sides, and in this Cyrano esconced himself. Here, hidden from the whole room, he relaxed comfortably to warmth, ease and the dusty bottles of old Chinon placed before him. His riding-boots off, his belt loosened, he was nodding across his table before the first bottle was more than half emptied, and fell asleep with his head on his arm.

Voices, interspersed with curses, wakened him from repose. Two men had entered the place and were seated at a table behind his settle, and he gathered that one of them had received a bad fall from his horse. Presently he caught words to pique his curiosity.

"We'll have to get back to the pavilion before the king returns," said one. "We can do it by road, easily enough."

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Cyrano sniffed at this. Two of the court, then!

"Time enough," and the other man laughed. "The Grand Equerry flung from his horse—a rich jest there for the Palais Cardinal, eh?"

Cyrano whistled to himself and came wide awake. He was in the presence of Cinq-Mars, then; M. le Grand, royal favorite, wastrel, greatest noble of the court! He listened with avid interest, but for some little time caught nothing definite. He was nodding again when a question brought him wide awake.

"This new dagger, Cinq-Mars, a present from a lady, eh?"

"A present for that damned cardinal!" came the snarling response. "Listen! Everything is arranged for next Saturday—that's why I brought you here. We can talk safely, and attend to the details on the way back. You're certain of your men? What news of Treville?"

"Hooked," came the response. "The king said this morning, in Treville's hearing, that he'd not be sorry if Richelieu were to die before Christmas. Treville thinks it was said as a hint of encouragement to us; it was not hard to persuade the old fool that Louis is a party to the plot. So Treville is

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satisfied, and will fall in with our plans. It's only a question now of who'll do the thing itself—"

"I'll do it myself," snapped Cinq-Mars. "I'll be riding beside Richelieu's carriage. So leave that to me, and you attend to the other details. What about Chevreuse? I can't get any word from her. Hasn't anyone seen her?"

"Nobody," came the answer. "They say she's in France, and was nearly caught, but got clear. The cardinal's men are raking the roads, and she's probably in hiding. Yet we must get word to Sedan at once, for the moment Richelieu's dead there must be sharp action."

"Enough of names," said Cinq-Mars with belated caution. "Finish your wine and we'll be off, if they've got my horse bandaged. We'll see to the details on the ride back."

Cyrano, when the two had departed, untwined his stiff legs, rose, and went to the window. One of the two nobles he did not know. The other, everyone in Paris knew—that young, handsome man so stamped with intolerable and passionate arrogance! Cinq-Mars, indeed.

"Mordious! Here's big news," thought Cyrano excitedly, as he returned to his table. "So Richelieu

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dies on Saturday, stabbed by the rascal he raised to power! I don't like that, me! And they've tricked honest old Treville into compliance, so he thinks the king's in the plot and won't interfere with his guards. I don't like that, either. M. de Treville is a good soldier. Devil take all court intrigues and their workers!"

He fell to drinking, gloomily thoughtful, and fully conscious of the risk he had run. If those two had known he was there, listening—whew! He would be in the Bastille quick as a coach could reach Paris.

Darkness had fallen, and Cyrano was lingering over the remnants of a gigantic repast, when d'Artagnan swung into the tavern, looking considerably pleased with himself. He came toward the fire, saw Cyrano sitting there, and stopped short in blank recognition. Cyrano grinned and waved his hand.

"Come, join me! A church is an excellent place for flirting with a pretty dame, but it's devilish cold. How goes the wound?"

D'Artagnan looked somewhat disconcerted.

"Name of the fiend—how are you? You're alone? Where's Vaugon?"

"Damme if I know," returned Cyrano. "After

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that most ungodly scrimmage, I found myself straggling down the road, with a bullet-scape across the cheek to increase my beauty. Nothing but dead men and horses when I got back, later—no sign of Vaugon or Plessis. That cur St. Aubin was dead as a nail, praise be to the saints! I've been wandering around ever since, and finally struck up this way."

D'Artagnan swung into a chair.

"And you've been using your eyes, eh? Well, Vaugon took the chance to give me the slip. I might have known."

"Softly, softly!" Cyrano stiffened a little. "Haste speaks there, my friend. I'm not particularly noted for discretion, but I don't find it advisable to stroke a cat the wrong way unless my hand's gloved."

"So?"

D'Artagnan regarded him steadily, with mounting heat. He had not relished that reference to flirting. The eyes of the two men met in a sharp clash of wills, the one pair darting, alert, angry, the other very steady and composed. A spark would have struck fire instantly, but Cyrano wanted no

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quarrel—he was too thoroughly sobered by what he had so recently overheard.

“You’re suspicious, my friend, and it shows a bad conscience,” he observed calmly. “You know well enough that I’ll uphold Vaugon’s honor, so why force matters? I’ve no intention of fighting you, just at present; that pleasure I must reserve, for the best of reasons, to a future occasion.”

“Yes?” D’Artagnan spoke softly, bordering upon an outburst. “And the reasons?”

Cyrano shrugged. Now it was false Gascon against real Gascon, shrewd city wits against native sagacity, but here Cyrano had imagination to aid him.

“One’s enough. For example, I’m the only disinterested person to know that on a certain day of next week, an old man in a red robe will die in a Paris street, and more, to know exactly how, by what weapon, by whose hand, at what spot, he will die!”

Although slightly exaggerated, the shot was not slow to reach its mark. As he comprehended just what lay behind these words, d’Artagnan’s eyes widened slightly. Cyrano calmly went on finishing up his scraps, then quaffed his wine with a contended

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sigh, sharply watched by d'Artagnan, whose gaze was now narrowed by calculation, slow credence, astonishment. As Cyrano very well knew, this actual Gascon had a very keen eye to the main chance.

"That is to say," added Cyrano carelessly, "all this will happen unless someone intervenes with a warning. Ah, this excellent Chinon! Come, taste of it, my friend—it's the very blood of Bacchus indeed!"

D'Artagnan disregarded this urging. "Hm!" he observed cannily, "I heard that M. le Grand and a friend had been here this afternoon, the court being at hunt in the forest—hm! And you were devilish well hidden in that settle. It's not hard to put two and two together, Cyrano—what the devil have you chanced on, eh?"

Cyrano grinned widely. He had caught his fish, sure enough. He could see with half an eye that d'Artagnan's busy brain was already figuring what reward would be due the man who brought Riche-lieu warning of the plot.

"Why, I've chanced on admirable old Chinon!" said Cyrano. "As regards Vaugon, I had a glimpse

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of him with St. Aubin thrusting sword into him from behind, and Vaugon paid him for it with a rip i' the throat that let out his dog's life. Probably our friend is lying up wounded at some tavern, with Plessis to care for him. A jolly guardian, eh? I envy the rascal!"

He caught sight of the host, beckoned, raised his voice. "Hola, host! Another half-dozen of this excellent old Chinon! That is, if M. d'Artagnan will do me the honor!"

D'Artagnan glanced at the two bottles already emptied. If two had served to render Cyrano garrulous, another half-dozen——

"By all means," he assented, with an air of determination not lost on Cyrano. "By all means! And if you've left anything in the place to eat, I'll have some dinner, too."

Thus was the slightly over-confident M. de Batz-Castlemore d'Artagnan led into the resolve to drink his companion under the table and worm the secret from him—a secret which certainly held fortune for the possessor. It was an excellent resolve, and had only one drawback. D'Artagnan did not know he was dealing with the most gloriously dissipated young man in all Paris.

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He discovered this fact for himself, and wakened next day to a great forgetfulness of what had taken place.

Toward noon it was when d'Artagnan descended to the inn yard, staggered to the pump, and held his aching head under the stream of water forced by a grinning groom. Presently he straightened up, dried hair and face, suppressed a groan, and turned bloodshot eyes upon the groom.

"M. de Bergerac has not been about yet?"

"Oh, yes, m'sieu! He was about quite early."

"The devil he was!" D'Artagnan blinked. "Get me a cup of the same wine we had last night. Where's M. de Bergerac now?"

"He rode away ten minutes ago, m'sieu, with M. Noyac, the notary. They went to look at a property M. de Bergerac was thinking of buying."

D'Artagnan's jaw dropped. "A property? And M. Noyac—what the devil's all this?"

"I think he left a note for you—one moment, m'sieu."

Five minutes later d'Artagnan put down a beaker of Chinon with a wry grimace, and fastened his astonished gaze upon a short note:

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"Comrade:

As we arranged last night, I shall keep M. Noyac pleasantly entertained for at least two hours, and I wish you all good luck during his absence. Be sure to carry out your part of the bargain. Until later!"

CYRANO.

D'Artagnan was stupefied.

"As we arranged—the bargain—what the deuce did we arrange, then? And M. Noyac—why, this devil knows everything! Hm! But I mistake. He's no rascal. He has every instinct of a gentleman! Two hours, eh? Come, come, no time to lose here!"

And breaking into a laugh, d'Artagnan smoothed down his hair, adjusted his blue and silver scarf, called for his hat, and in five minutes was swaggering down the road to visit the notary, with whose pretty wife he had become well acquainted during his stay at the Hanged Wolf.

Later in the day, the two men met in the tavern room. Facing Cyrano across a table, d'Artagnan solemnly lifted his flagon.

"Comrade, I drink to your newly purchased property!" he said, a twinkle in his eye. "And to——"

"The notary's wife," added Cyrano with a guff-

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faw. "I hope you entertained her to more purpose than I did her dried-up rogue of a husband! Come, I did you an excellent turn there—confess it!"

"With all my heart," said d'Artagnan, laughing. Yet despite his laughter, a slight uneasiness sat upon him, as his companion noted.

"Give me no more quips about Vaugon," said Cyrano placidly. "The fog did us an ill turn that day, but I fancy he'll turn up with Plessis sooner or later—we'll see him either here or in Paris. All's for the best, and the bargain we made last night settles the matter admirably."

"Ah!" said d'Artagnan. "The precise terms of our arrangement aren't so clear as they might be."

"Mordious! You've forgotten already?"

D'Artagnan flushed. Cyrano always rubbed him the wrong way—the hint of mockery in those savage black eyes rather touched his quick pride on the raw.

"I was drunk," he said simply. "What was the bargain?"

Cyrano stared at him in assumed astonishment, then laughed.

"Faith, the one you proposed! I was to get you an hour or two with the notary's wife, and in return

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you were to give up your pursuit of Vaugon and not arrest him."

D'Artagnan's eyes widened, and then his face became very white.

"No, no!" he said in a choked, incredulous voice. "You mistake, Cyrano!"

"Mistake? I?" Cyrano gaped at him. "Mordious! I've done my share of it, and—mistake? How, then?"

"It's false!" cried out d'Artagnan in sudden wild indignation. "Barter my honor, my duty, for a woman? Drunk or sober, that were impossible! It's false, I say!"

Cyrano emptied his flagon at a gulp, set it down, looked hard at the enraged and dismayed cadet. Wine never confused the Bergerac brain—only clarified it, set it mightily to work. His dark eyes blazed with strange fires, as he stared at the other man.

"Vivadiou! What's honor, then—how bounded, how qualified, how described? You, who sat here and swore to me last night on the faith of a gentleman, now cast the lie in my teeth? That's honor o' the moon for you! One of these days I'll lay by the sword and write a book upon the moon, the

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states and empires of that strange planet; perhaps my gas-machine will carry me thither, who knows? But I'd never put in the book that a gentleman of Gascony would gainsay his word given a comrade! That would never be believed—"

"Enough!" D'Artagnan's fist pounded the table, his tortured eyes shot fire at the speaker. "I say it's impossible that I should so bargain away my honor! Lie in your teeth—aye, a dozen times and more!"

Cyrano disregarded the enraged glare, the challenging words—he knew very well that d'Artagnan spoke only the cold truth, and chuckled to himself. This was the moment for which he had been angling all the while.

"But," he said slowly, pausing to let his words sink in, "you can see for yourself that I've carried out my share of it! And besides, I told you everything—everything! You agree that you'd ride to Paris tonight, take word to Richelieu—pox on the whole thing! I was drunk myself, and that's the truth. You played me for a fool, eh? You mean to trick me out of it all, eh? Well, let it pass. I'd still keep the bargain for Vaugon's sake, but if that's the sort you are——"

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So saying, he shook his head sadly and stared down gloomily at his wine cup.

D'Artagnan, hearing all this, positively froze in his seat. Was it possible that Cyrano had revealed the secret to him, and he too drunk to remember it? Cold sweat sprang on his forehead, as he balanced the possibilities.

For a long moment he struggled with himself, duty clashing with opportunism. He had strict orders not to return without Vaugon, yet he had already lost Vaugon. And here was news that meant life or death to Richelieu! All the world gossiped already of how Cinq-Mars urged the king to have the cardinal assassinated, and here was the whole detailed plot to take Richelieu! What mattered Vaugon, what mattered orders—

"Ah, keep your damned secret!" he burst out in sudden decision. The veins swelled dark on his forehead with surcharge of passion. "It's impossible, impossible! I made no such bargain drunk, and will make none sober!"

Cyrano lifted cool and steady eyes.

"Come, a last chance!" he said slowly, deliberately tempting the other. "The day, the hour, the manner, the very weapon which strikes the blow, the

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share M. de Treville will have in it! Does all this mean nothing to you?"

"Cadédis! Devil take you and Cinq-Mars and your blasted secret as well!" shouted d'Artagnan furiously, starting to his feet. "I've my orders, and I'll stick to them—if you don't like it, out with your sword like a man!"

"No," and Cyrano dropped his head sadly. "No, we've been comrades, friends, stood together in battle; I'll not fight you now. Perhaps, when we meet again—"

He stared moodily down at the table. D'Artagnan, still raging, mouthed a curse and stamped out of the tavern.

Left alone, a sly grin broke upon Cyrano's wide lips. The grin developed into roar upon roar of mirth, heroic laughter that came echoing back from the beams overhead, wave after wave of it. Then, quenching mirth in a deep beaker of wine, Cyrano fell to chuckling.

"More of a man than I'd thought him!" he muttered admiringly. "I had him there—had him snared and trapped, fighting against himself—and he broke out of the trap! A man, indeed, and the more dangerous if he can conquer himself. Mordi-

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ous! I'll have to fight him sooner or later. Garçon!
De quoi écrire!"

Before him on the table were set ink and paper, quill and sand. He sharpened the quill to his taste, then wrote a very brief epistle, read it over with a nod and a twinkle in his eye, and signed it, not with his own huge sprawling "Cyrano," but with another name. He called for wax, and a light, sanded and folded the paper, and over its edges dropped two blobs of wax.

Into these he pressed the gold seal-ring from his little finger. He looked down at the large lion *en sautoir*, the two lion-skins, the chevron separating the three, and smiled slightly.

"They should be fish-skins, by rights—eh?" he said in sardonic mockery. "Well, well, if I don't get hanged for wearing them, these arms will yet be known in Paris! Richelieu won't know them or care about them. Poor wastrel poet, poor half-baked philosopher, poor amateur scientist, at least the good God gave you a sword-wrist better than most!"

Outside, d'Artagnan stood in the inn-yard, talking earnestly with the host, but Cyrano did not observe this. The afternoon was half spent.

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His letter finished and pocketed, Cyrano applied himself to the wine, turning his time to scribbling bits of verse with more or less abstraction. He had small hope of now encountering Vaugon, but was not pressed to return to Paris. If Vaugon by any chance did turn and make for the capital, the chances were good that he must pass through here, since he most certainly would not return by the Orleans road. True, a week had passed since that wild affray to the south, a week and more—however, this was a fairly logical chance, and the only one.

Cyrano drank steadily. After a time he took out the letter and turned it over in his hand, rubbed his long nose, hesitated.

"A fortune here," he muttered thickly. "Aye, fortune—if it reached the right hand! Not Mazarin's—that cursed little cat of an Italian may be hand in glove with Cinq-Mars, indeed! Why not keep all the luck for myself, then? Lord knows I need it—but nonsense! You're damned to start with, poor Cyrano! Drown life in liquor if you can, wallow in the mud so you can look the better at the stars, turn fierce front to all the world and kill those who laugh. It's the one thing you can do,

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this killing! So pass the luck to a better man, and be damned to you."

He shrugged, repocketed the letter, finished the last bottle of wine, and with rather unsteady step sought the crisp clearness of the open air. D'Artagnan had vanished, the inn-yard was empty except for a groom washing down the stones near the stable. Cyrano stood leaning against the door-post.

Two riders turned in from the road.

The horses were sorry hacks, skin and bones, heads adroop. Cyrano chuckled at them, and chuckled again at the dismounting riders, very obviously some country gentleman and his lackey, clad in queer garments that had certainly been cut a generation ago under Henri Quatre. Then the lackey touched his master's arm and pointed; they both turned and stared at the figure in the doorway.

Cyrano's jaw fell. He blinked rapidly, thrust his head forward and peered at them in stark amazement, fell back a pace as they advanced.

"A miracle!" he exclaimed, still staring. "A veritable miracle!"

"Not a bit of it," said Vaugon, laughing, and put out his hand to grip that of Cyrano. "Not a bit

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of it! At Igny, we heard you had passed this way, and followed."

"Eh? You heard—at Igny?" stammered Cyrano. Plessis laughed gaily.

"Just so, comrade, just so—how are you? We met a Norman gentleman at the inn there, with a sword-thrust in his body, who reported your passing."

"Ah, that Norman!" Cyrano grinned delightedly as he wrung their hands. "You know what he said? That they had named a city in Canada after me, one Quebec. Because when the Normans discovered the headland where it lies, they said: '*Quebec!*' What a beak, you get the point? He thought it a fine joke until I taught him otherwise—oh, devil take me, I'm drunk as a fool! Come in, come in, comrades! My heart's full to see you again—that rogue d'Artagnan's here. You'll have to look out for him, Vaugon. And what a charming lackey we have here! I don't think much of your clothes. Where'd you find them?"

"We went to some trouble to get them," and Vaugon broke in upon the garrulous flood of words, as Cyrano led them back to his table. "A wound on your cheek, eh? I was nearly done for, but

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Plessis got me away, with Berville—well, we've a lot to talk over, and we're half famished and frozen. By the way, we had a glimpse of Comte de Fleury in Igny—he was there with a number of other gentlemen. I don't think he noticed either of us, but one can't always be sure."

"To the devil with him," said Cyrano. "Sit down, sit down! Half a dozen bottles, host, and dinner on the spit! Let's get our talk out before d'Artagnan finds us. I don't like that shrewd rascal by half, let me tell you. Well, to the tale. Where've you been?"

"Wandering," said Vaugon.

The three settled down, broke into rapid words, filled the gap of days with elapsed incident. As both Cyrano and d'Artagnan had rightly reckoned, Vaugon had determined to circle around to Paris, and there hide out his appointed time. He and Plessis had sold their fine horses, had located some old-fashioned garments, and thus counted on evading any possible recognition.

More than once the passport had saved them from unpleasant questioning, and there was no doubt that the roads were being watched by a small army; but since the passport had procured every help and

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furtherance, obviously no alarm was out for Sieur Nicolas Vaugon. It was no mere chance but shrewd road-logic that had brought the two of them to the auberge of the Loup Pendu, scarce a short day's ride from Paris.

"It's for Berville the country is being scoured," said Plessis confidently, "and not for us—in general. Fleury is probably conducting a hunt of his own for me."

"Berville?" Cyrano looked at her curiously, but she only laughed and refused to answer. Vaugon shrugged. He knew no more of the chevalier than before, though he was strong in his suspicion that they were dealing here with Monsieur, the king's brother.

Over the wine, Cyrano grew confidential—to a certain degree. He told of having overheard a plot against Richelieu, but gave no details of it; then drew forth the letter he had written, without superscription. He flung it at Vaugon.

"Here, take this, I give it to you! Get that into Richelieu's hands before Friday—you've all week ahead. You have the secret in your pocket, I have it in my head."

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A flush mounting in his face, Vaugon hesitated, "This is your affair."

"It's yours," said Cyrano stubbornly. "Your head's looser than mine, comrade. We'll go back to Paris together, but in case of accident we're prepared—you comprehend?"

A flush mounting in his face, Vaugon hesitated, then angrily threw down the letter.

"Prepared—to give the red minister warning? Not I! Damned if I do! Let him be killed, and good riddance. The quicker they put bullet or knife into him, the sooner France is safe for me. Warning—warning! Damned if I do!"

"Damned if you don't," returned Cyrano, with a weary gesture, as of one who must explain to a fool. Vaugon sensed stubborn steel will in the man's gaze, and wondered.

"What business is it of yours?" he snapped. "And why should you——"

"Tut, tut!" Cyrano emptied his cup and gave Plessis a glance. "Here, comrade, should we warn him or not, eh? What's your advice?"

"Mine? I'm no friend to Richelieu," said the girl. "Yet—assassination——"

"Just so," mimicked Cyrano, with a gust of

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laughter. "Assassination! My instincts of a gentleman rebel before it, my instincts of a grand-sire fish-monger!"

"Stop your cursed satiric tone and speak soberly," growled Vaugon, irresolute. The swarthy hook-nosed face thrust at him across the table.

"Soberly? All right. Do I love Richelieu? Bah! You're a fool, Vaugon, a fool! I'd not warn him for love of him, be sure. Still, I've got enough common sense to use a sword when it's put in my hand, haven't I?" His fingers tapped at the folded letter. "There's a sword, a key, a weapon, a what you like! Get it into Richelieu's hands, and your pardon——"

"Richelieu be damned! He's nothing to pardon me for!" cried Vaugon hotly. "I'll ask nothing from him. I'll go to the king, yes, and I'll keep the name that's been given me, and get a royal warrant for it——"

"Yes, I said you're a fool," and Cyrano grimaced. "Get this letter to Richelieu, then, as *Sieur Nicolas Vaugon*! Surely Vaugon has nothing against the cardinal. Touched you there, eh? All your prating of a dead past, eh? Well, look at it this way, then. Richelieu's a great man. I admire him, respect

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him. I'm not a gentleman, but I don't like to see him knifed in the gutter by a cowardly little devil who's afraid to face him openly."

Vaugon flushed again, this time with abrupt shame. "Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps——"

"Looks different from that angle?" Cyrano grinned. "Sensible man! Why despise a gift of the gods? Whoever gets that letter to Richelieu—his fortune's made! We'll manage it. I don't love the red minister, but I can't stomach this dirty method of killing. Besides, they have tricked old Treville to make sure of him and his guards—well, no matter. You have the thing there, so use it as the chance comes. It's set for next Saturday."

"Next Saturday? That's the fifteenth of the month," said Plessis, violet eyes wide.

"And a lot can happen in the four days between now and then," said Vaugon, turning over the letter in his hand, then pocketing it. "Very well. In case——"

He looked up to see d'Artagnan standing there watching him. He half rose, hand outstretched, but d'Artagnan only bowed slightly.

"I regret that I must obey my instructions, M.

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Vaugon," he said. "I arrest you, in the king's name."

With a bellow, Cyrano swung to his feet, hand on sword. But behind and around d'Artagnan were the host, two grooms, and two scullions from the kitchen, all of them armed. Before Cyrano could draw blade, Vaugon's hand checked him.

"Wait! M. d'Artagnan, you mean this arrest?"

"I do," said d'Artagnan, in a firm yet somewhat gloomy tone. "I was ordered to arrest you when any despatches were given or received. Our comradeship is ended; I must do my duty. You cannot escape—"

Vaugon smiled. "My dear d'Artagnan, I have no intention of escaping, I assure you! That is, provided your orders have nothing to do with M. le Plessis or M. de Bergerac."

"Nothing," said d'Artagnan. "They concern you alone."

His attitude was inflexible, cold, stern. Vaugon smiled again and held out his hand.

"No blame to one who does his duty—won't you join us?"

"Thank you, no." D'Artagnan shook hands, then stepped back. "We must have an understand-

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ing now. Ride with me in the morning—I accept your parole. Eh?”

“Agreed,” said Vaugon. “I give you my word that I’ll ride with you in the morning—but I don’t say that I’ll accompany you to Paris.”

“In which case, I’ll ask for your weapons before we leave.”

“Very well.”

“And touching those despatches in your pocket—I must ask you for them.”

There was a little silence. Vaugon was not aware of all that had preceded his arrival, but perceived something was in the air. Cyrano sensed the whole thing instantly—d’Artagnan knew what was in that letter, had taken this means of obtaining it! He broke into a laugh, half of amusement, half of scorn at the ruse, and under this laugh d’Artagnan reddened deeply.

“Despatches? The letter Cyrano just gave me?” said Vaugon. “Hm! Your orders are to arrest me, bring me with any despatches to Richelieu? Very well. The letter stays in my pocket. When you bring me to Richelieu, I give it to him. Agreed?”

Cyrano chuckled delightedly. D’Artagnan was

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furious, but checkedmated; he bit his lip, bowed, motioned the tavern host and servants to withdraw, and followed them. The three at the table found themselves alone, staring one at another.

"Mordious! You blocked him there," exclaimed Cyrano. "He knows what's in the letter—wants to use it himself, you see? But, Vaugon, this is utter mad folly! It's useless! There's not even a highway tavern until you reach Chatillon, and there he can get guards. He'll do it, certainly. You mean for me to set out ahead, lay in wait, and take care of this rascal—"

"No, no!" Vaugon laughed, as he met the anxious gaze of Plessis. "You and our friend here leave ahead of me, by all means. I place M. le Plessis in your care, Cyrano. Go on to Paris, and we'll make rendezvous at the Pinecone or at your lodgings."

"Eh?" Cyrano frowned. "But if you let this rogue arrest you——"

Vaugon chuckled. "Come, have faith! You'll make a brief stay in Chatillon, arrange certain things, then go on and leave the rest to me. The safety of Plessis is all-important."

"It's not!" broke in the girl abruptly. "Vaugon,

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I won't have this! You can't give yourself up in order to save me."

"I don't intend to," said Vaugon, with such emphasis as to convince them. "Cyrano, take orders from me and all goes happily. Do you agree?"

"If you insist," said Cyrano, frowning. "But I don't like it. I tell you this Gascon is a sharp little fox—here he comes back again. What now?"

D'Artagnan approached them, alone, and bowed.

"Sieur Vaugon," he asked, "would it suit you to ride at nine in the morning?"

"Certainly," said Vaugon. "And I'll give you my parole as far as Chatillon."

"Excellent! You haven't secured a room here yet? I believe they're rather scarce," and for an instant d'Artagnan's eye went to Plessis. "In fact, there's only one other. So perhaps you'll consent to share mine for the night, and Plessis can take the extra one."

Vaugon assented, despite Cyrano's narrowed, inquiring gaze. He was far from guessing the exact reason for this request, and laid it to d'Artagnan's delicacy. He might much better have laid it to d'Artagnan's sagacity. The young guardsman was

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already thinking of certain queries that would inevitably be asked at the Palais Cardinal.

"Come," said Vaugon warmly, "sit down, join us, forget anything lies between us."

"Impossible, monsieur," and d'Artagnan bowed stiffly. "We are and must be, I regret to say, officer and prisoner—"

Cyrano came to his feet with a growling oath.

"When we meet in Paris, M. d'Artagnan, you and I will have a very prompt settlement. Do you understand? I think you're a churl."

D'Artagnan's mustache quivered with concealed rage as he regarded the other.

"I shall be honored to cross swords with you, M. de Bergerac," he said formally, "when I do not happen to be on duty."

With another bow, he swung loftily away and disappeared into the inn yard.

"Impudent puppy, trying to impress us with your damned importance!" growled Cyrano. "I know you better. You'll learn something when our swords meet."

Vaugon laughed and pulled Cyrano down into his chair.

"Sit down—listen to orders! If I leave at nine

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in the morning, you and Plessis leave at eight. And I promise you swift and sharp revenge on our friend yonder, if you listen carefully—”

Cyrano listened most carefully.

CHAPTER X

IN the morning, Vaugon and d'Artagnan broke their fast together. The cadet made no comment upon the departure of Cyrano and Plessis; in fact, he said very little until the host was paid and they were pulling on hats and cloaks. Then he turned to Vaugon, impulsively.

"I'm sorry for this," he said frankly. "I know the cardinal's in error—that's not my business. You're no woman. He'll never learn your real identity from me, however—be sure of that!"

Vaugon put out his hand.

"Of course—I never doubted you. Last night—"

"Bergerac and I don't get on," and d'Artagnan shrugged. "I was trying to be formal and cold lest he and I come to blows, that's all."

"So we're friends to Chatillon. There we become officer and prisoner. Is that it?"

"Yes."

Thus they rode forth. If d'Artagnan turned in the saddle, as they passed the notary's house, and

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blew a kiss at a moving curtain in a window, that was strictly his own business.

Circling the forest, they presently came into the Versailles highway—a straight ride ahead of them to Chatillon and Paris. The two men talked as they rode, filling up the gaps of elapsed time. Vaugon had no hesitation in speaking frankly with d'Artagnan; the latter might be shrewd, indeed, but above all else he was honorable.

When Vaugon, then, told of the Norman gentleman whom Cyrano had laid low in Igny, and of how he himself had seen Comte de Fleury there, d'Artagnan broke into a whistle.

"Faith, I wish you'd told me that yesterday—we're lucky to be clear! Don't you see? Fleury will certainly hear of Cyrano from that Norman. He'll know you and Cyrano were in company, and will know you are both concerned in the disappearance of Mlle. de Closset—you get it now? If he hears of Cyrano, he'll be after him to the Loup Pendu post-haste! And if he gets there, follows us, finds you——"

"Yes?" prompted Vaugon, as the other paused.

"He finds me," said d'Artagnan, and gave him a sharp look. "Kindly give me your sword, here

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and now. If Fleury comes up with us, I don't intend you shall fight him—my orders are to protect you from all harm."

"Since I'm a woman in disguise, eh?" Vaugon chuckled and unloosed his baldric. "Take it, then. I certainly don't want to fight with Fleury again. However, I think you're far wrong. We're well ahead of him—we don't even know he'll trace us."

"I'll wager you fifty pistoles he heard of the Norman last night, got his story, and is making for the Loup Pendu now! You'll see. And we can't keep ahead of him."

D'Artagnan glanced regretfully at Vaugon's horse. He himself still had one of the superb animals furnished by Richelieu, but Vaugon's mount would be lucky to stagger into Paris alive, much less outrun any pursuit. So the cadet shrugged and awaited the event, but he did not have long to wait ere he was proven right.

They were halfway to Chatillon when Vaugon, glancing back from a slight eminence along the straight, snow-bordered road, uttered a low word.

"Ah—look!"

D'Artagnan turned, saw three horses spurring hard behind them, and nodded calmly.

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"I knew it. Fleury and two friends."

"Three of them, two of us," said Vaugon quickly.

"Give back my sword, if you like——"

"No!" Pride mantled the cadet's cheek darkly.

"Cadédis, no! Remember, you're my prisoner—I'm on my rights here!"

D'Artagnan relapsed into frowning thought, as they rode on.

It was curious, reflected Vaugon, how matters were working out, how the slight threads of destiny were drawing together and slowly knotting. Here was Fleury—the foremost of the three riders, now close enough to be recognized—who had picked up the trail from Cyrano's encounter in Igny. Plessis was for the moment safe enough, ahead with Cyrano, yet there were other threads still floating free. Berville, for instance, that man of mystery! Yet perhaps this thread, too, would be gathered into the knot——

"I have it!" exclaimed d'Artagnan, with a sudden start, and lifted a delighted face. "By the saints, I have it——"

"Holá!" rang the sharp shout from behind.

"Messieurs!"

With a thin smile, d'Artagnan drew rein and

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turned his horse. He waited, impervious, stern, cool, fully dominant. Comte de Fleury was well in advance of the other two riders, and came on at a gallop. He drew rein impetuously, his angry gaze on Vaugon.

"So I've caught you!" he cried out.

D'Artagnan's horse barred his way.

"Pardon," said the cadet. "I am M. d'Artagnan of the guards——"

"Then kindly get out of my way," exclaimed Fleury. "I have business with this gentleman!"

"Does your business supersede mine, M. de Fleury?" asked d'Artagnan calmly. Remembering that exclamation: "I have it!" Vaugon listened curiously. He saw that the cadet was pursuing some deliberate line of conduct, and wondered what it might be.

"Name of the devil, it does!" cried Fleury hotly. "Do you know this rascal ran away with a lady—do you know he kidnapped a ward of the king——"

His two companions came up at this instant and drew rein.

"I think you mistake," said d'Artagnan. He was very polite, very formal. He completely held the center of the stage, and was quite aware of it. By

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the attitude of Fleury's two friends, he shrewdly judged them to be irresolute. "This gentleman is *Sieur Vaugon*."

"Exactly!" cried Fleury, his strong, dark features convulsed by anger. "*Sieur Vaugon*, *Sieur Nobody*, blast him! He must answer to me here and now _____"

"Softly, softly," interposed d'Artagnan. "Gentlemen, I call you all to witness that *Sieur Vaugon* is under arrest. He is a prisoner in my charge, and I'm responsible for his safety. I have my duty to _____"

"To the devil with your duty, and you too!" stormed Fleury.

His companions attempted to intervene, but with a snarled oath he swept them aside and brought his horse up beside that of d'Artagnan. Passionate fury had him in its grip.

"You know who I am, *monsieur*," he exclaimed menacingly. "Stand back—out of my way! I'll become answerable here. His Eminence will back what I do——"

"*Monsieur*," said d'Artagnan with cold and excessive politeness, "I receive orders only from the king or his minister. In this instance, they come

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from His Eminence in person, and are very precise. I advise you not to interfere."

"Damn your advice and you too!" fumed Fleury in headstrong rage. "D'you think I've been coursing the roads the past week for nothing? Not a bit of it. I've run down the quarry, and I mean to see the matter through here and now. M. Vaugon, where is the lady? Answer me, you cursed scoundrel!"

Vaugon had no intention of intervening. D'Artagnan was playing some shrewd and deep game, and he refused to spoil it. He only smiled in silence, and before this mocking smile, Fleury completely lost his head. He leaned out and struck d'Artagnan across the face.

"You cursed young fool——"

D'Artagnan slipped from the saddle.

"Gentlemen," he said calmly, "you are witnesses to what has passed. Since you have a sword, M. de Fleury, perhaps you're not afraid to use it? That is, if your late wound does not hinder——"

Fleury, who had apparently quite recovered from the wound given him by Vaugon, dismounted eagerly enough. Once again his companions protested, but he flung them savagely aside and whipped out his

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rapier. They, it seemed, were more than dismayed by his passionate rage, knowing he had pushed things too far; they displayed no intention of molesting Vaugon, who received his sword back from d'Artagnan and waited, like them, motionless.

"En garde, puppy!" snarled Fleury, and threw himself into the attack with a vicious and determined anger driving him.

D'Artagnan, smiling slightly, received the assault with perfect ease, and from the outset Vaugon perceived there could be but one ending. The one man was absolutely cool, perfectly master of himself and of his weapon; the other, panting forth threats and oaths in headlong rage, was fighting recklessly and not well. Indeed, Fleury attacked with bursts of blind fury, wore himself out, effected nothing. His foot slipped, he came to one knee, and d'Artagnan lowered his point and spoke sharply.

"Wait! I beg of you, M. de Fleury, consider what you're doing——"

Fleury's steel drove up at him—an unexpected, vicious lunge from the ground. The point touched, barely broke the skin on d'Artagnan's neck; at this, for the first time, the cadet flung himself forward in a direct assault.

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Before the dazzling mastery of this attack, Fleury was all but helpless. D'Artagnan was at work in cold precision, as though he had only been waiting for the touch of blood on his neck to spur him—but Vaugon judged that the wound had not touched his temper at all. He knew exactly what he was doing.

No more waiting now, no more hesitation—his face set in pitiless lines, d'Artagnan lunged, lunged again, drove home a lightning-blow, and stood waiting. Fleury, pierced through the heart, collapsed and was dead ere he fell to earth.

"Gentlemen, I ask you to witness what happened," said d'Artagnan, scarce out of breath. "If you will be kind enough to give me your names——"

The other two bowed. They had dismounted, stooped over the dead man, found their task useless. One of them gloomily assented to the request, and gave their names.

"You were not at fault, M. d'Artagnan," he said.

The cadet mounted, gestured to Vaugon, saluted the two, and took up the road again for Paris. For a space neither man spoke, until d'Artagnan broke silence.

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"Well, duty is duty!" he said with a grim smile.
"A marvelous phrase, that!"

"Hm!" said Vaugon. "Fleury is a relative of the cardinal. You're in for trouble."

"Ah! I know our cardinal!" D'Artagnan twirled his mustache. "Trouble? Not a bit of it. Rather, promotion! Until now, I've been a cadet, unremarked, unobserved, unnoted. Now I'm the man who killed Fleury—you perceive? I've made my first step."

"Eh?" Vaugon stared at him. "You're in earnest? But you'll be punished——"

"Not I! Richelieu's a great man, no petty rascal," said the other confidently. "I did my duty. Fleury attacked me, wounded me. I've two witnesses—one of them will certainly make all haste to Paris and will tell his story before I get there. Justice, in the cardinal's eyes, is inexorable, particularly where his friends are concerned. What's the answer? My guardsman's cassock. You'll see. I've made my first step up!"

Vaugon whistled in amazement. Shrewd calculation, daring gamble—but probably safe enough! He flung the cadet a look of admiration.

"Well," he said with a laugh, "at all events, I

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owe you thanks! Upon my word, I begin to feel sorry for what I must do."

"Eh?" D'Artagnan shot a look at him. "What you must do?"

"You'll see." Vaugon shrugged. "I regret it, my friend—but never mind. Is that Chatillon ahead?"

D'Artagnan nodded at sight of the towers, rather uneasily. Vaugon's words perturbed him, and he probed his companion with sharp frowning glances.

The town opened out ahead of them—it was still an hour before midday. When they came to the market square before the church they found it crammed with folk, for market was in full swing. The square and streets around were not easy of passage.

"Unless you renew your parole," said d'Artagnan, "I must obtain guards here."

"My parole's ended, and there are guards now." Vaugon gestured to a number of soldiers regulating the crowded traffic ahead.

"As you like," said d'Artagnan. "Ah, the provost's guard—and the provost himself!"

It was indeed the provost himself, as his gold chain and baton indicated, who held up a hand to

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them with an order to halt. His men closed the open lane.

"Who are you, messieurs?" he demanded curtly. Before d'Artagnan could respond, Vaugon pushed out his horse and extended his passport.

"In the king's name! I demand aid, monsieur—this gentleman has arrested me without cause and without any warrant. I demand your help, in the king's name!"

For an instant d'Artagnan was speechless, stupefied with amazement. Then an oath broke from him and he started to speak. The provost, who had taken the passport, checked him.

"In your turn, monsieur, in your turn! One moment, please."

D'Artagnan bit his lip, flung one angry look at Vaugon, and waited. The provost read over the passport, and returned it to Vaugon with a low bow.

"Sieur Vaugon, I salute the orders and signature of His Majesty. I was advised of your coming. Now, monsieur of the guard, what is all this?"

"This gentleman is my prisoner," said d'Artagnan. "As you see, I am of His Majesty's guards. I demand free passage, and two cavaliers to escort my prisoner to Paris."

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The provost smiled. "I have every respect for His Majesty's guards, monsieur, but still more respect for His Majesty's signature. You have, no doubt, a written order of arrest?"

"I have not," said d'Artagnan, seeing now in what trap he was fallen. He was white with rage but was utterly helpless. "I warn you that——"

"Save your warning, monsieur," said the provost calmly, and turned to Vaugon. "Under the royal seal, Sieur Vaugon, you have only to ask what you like. Is it your pleasure that I arrest this gentleman?"

Vaugon looked at d'Artagnan, and before the white despair of the cadet's face, his sense of triumph died out. Cyrano had managed things well, and Vaugon felt sorry for d'Artagnan in this moment.

"Not at all, monsieur," he returned. "M. d'Artagnan has exceeded his orders only through too great zeal. Let us speak together apart, and I think we can arrange matters."

The provost assented. Vaugon brought his horse beside that of the cadet, and took out the sealed letter Cyrano had given him. He had already

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guessed the letter to be anonymous, though Cyrano had not said as much; as a warning, it would be no less effective.

"My friend, we owe each other something," he said. "Here's the letter Cyrano gave me. I haven't read it, but he stated that it contained details of a plot—must be given into the hands of Richelieu in person. You know about it? Then take it, deliver it!"

The bitter chagrin of d'Artagnan was melted by these words.

"Vaugon, you're too generous," he said hoarsely. "No, I can't——"

"Take it." Vaugon smiled and extended the letter. "My dear fellow, you forgot about my passport, and you're helpless. Take this—it'll save the day for you with Richelieu."

"I accept, then, with thanks," and d'Artagnan took the missive. "But why should you send this, to him?"

Vaugon shrugged. "Not from any love of him, believe me! By all logic, I should burn the warning and let fate take its course—bah! Cyrano was right. Why despise such a gift of the gods! Here's a valuable thing, and it's yours to use. I'd not use

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it myself, I tell you frankly. Let the red minister die tomorrow, for all of me!"

"Very well. Then avoid Paris," said d'Artagnan. "Otherwise, you're lost. The chances are that your passport will be annulled and I'll be ordered to find you. Even if I say you gave me the warning _____,"

"Eh? Don't you dare!" snapped Vaugon angrily. "Don't dare tell him that—I'll deny it! Devil take him for all of me—I ask nothing from that man! As for going on to Paris, never fear. Do me one favor, and we'll be quits. Remember, I told you about the document signed by the king, which Mazarin showed me that night? Then see Mazarin, tell him I have urgent need of that document, and get it for me—send it to me at the Pinecone. Do this in friendship, do what must be done in duty, and don't worry about the consequences. Agreed?"

"With all my heart! I'll get that paper for you if I have to wring Mazarin's neck for it!"

D'Artagnan's face brightened. His hand went out and he gave Vaugon a strong, warm grip. "I only hope we don't meet again—hope I don't have to arrest you a second time, my friend! Be advised, then. Don't come to Paris, but make quickly for

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England before this passport of yours is annulled."

Vaugon shook his head.

"No, it's win or lose all, d'Artagnan. Good luck—and don't turn over that warning to Mazarin!"

"I'm not that much of a fool—farewell, and thanks!" D'Artagnan turned his horse and saluted the provost. "Monsieur, I have released my prisoner from arrest. Have I your permission to ride on?"

At a nod from Vaugon, the provost ordered his men to open ranks. D'Artagnan drove in his spurs, and was gone on the road to Paris.

An hour later, after baiting his horse and himself, Vaugon followed. He rode slowly out of Chatillon, unhurried, content to reach Paris toward evening. The passport would still serve to give him entrance, for it could not be annulled before the following day at least. And as he jogged on, he smiled to himself at thought of the scene in Chatillon.

"Odd how d'Artagnan forgot the little detail of that passport!" he reflected. "He ran slap into the snare—well, he's a good fellow enough, and I'm glad I gave him the warning letter. Richelieu will easily enough pardon him for losing me, after that! Yet if he and Cyrano meet again, fur will certainly

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fly; those two men don't like each other by half. What a swordsman this d'Artagnan is, too! If they meet, Cyrano must look to his laurels."

So far as he himself was concerned, Vaugon had no particular worry. Comte de Fleury was dead, he could take Mlle. de Closset openly to the Louvre, he could there claim his reward; and he knew exactly what reward he meant to claim.

There was a reverse to the medal, of course. Richelieu was no man to be easily baffled, to accept defeat without striking shrewdly back. Vaugon was under no illusion as regarded his peril, but he meant to forestall it by reaching the Louvre as soon as possible, and the ear of the king.

Also, he had considerable faith in Mazarin. Upon this wily Italian, Vaugon was content to place full trust and confidence; his one meeting with the man in the Pinecone, added to what he had learned of Mazarin, had been enough to show him the tremendous potentiality of the dark little abbé. Then, Mazarin was certainly working with both the king and the queen in this whole matter, and would stand behind Vaugon to a large extent.

"There's no gratitude in princes," thought Vaugon, "but there's a world of self-interest in M.

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de Mazarin—and for his own sake, he'll help to keep me out of the cardinal's toils. Besides, I've got to see the game through to the finish, play it hard and strong! I've staked everything on this bid for the future, and I'll not turn back now."

So the heights of Chatillon fell behind, and he rode on toward Montrouge and Paris, passing group after group of charcoal-burners, the heaviest users of this road. He had only a league left ahead of him, when he descried a cavalier sitting his horse beneath a wide oak-tree, whose scant brown leaves whistled in the wind.

As Vaugon approached, the cavalier, muffled to the eyes in a tattered old cloak, pushed out to meet him.

"Your passport, monsieur!" cried a mocking voice. Vaugon's jaw fell as he recognized Berville.

"You!" he exclaimed, amazed. "By what magic
——"

"By force of circumstances, like yourself no doubt," and the chevalier broke into a ringing laugh. "Well met! Whence come you? Where are our friends?"

Vaugon looked steadily at the man for a moment.

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Evidently Berville knew nothing of Cyrano, Plessis or d'Artagnan having passed by this road today.

"Safe enough," he said presently. "You were not waiting here for me?"

"Don't flatter yourself," and Berville made a wry grimace. He looked oddly drawn and weary, exhausted. "I'm about at the last gasp, and waiting here for promised help. If it doesn't come within half an hour—then His Eminence will be a merry man tonight! Well, well, you're still angry with me, my Montmorenci!"

Much as he owed the chevalier, Vaugon could not check sharp anger.

"My dear M. de Berville, or Monsieur, or whoever the devil you are," he rejoined, "I don't like your pleasantry. There is no Montmorenci alive. I've warned you for the last time on this head. Farewell."

He picked up his reins, when Berville flung back his head and laughed.

"But the joke of it is, my dear Montmorenci——"

Vaugon was stung by the words, by the manner of them, by the laugh. He reached down suddenly and caught Berville by the throat, in no gentle grip. Before his cold anger, Berville's blue eyes went wide

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with abrupt fright—then, unexpectedly, the chevalier fell forward in a dead faint.

Instantly contrite, cursing his own hot temper, Vaugon dismounted. He carried Berville off the road to the clear ground beneath the oak. After all, he owed this man gratitude; it had been petty of him to so vent his dislike and irritation. Why, the poor devil must have been at the very point of exhaustion!

Vaugon got a flask of cognac from his saddle-bag, poured some between the pallid lips, began to chafe the slender jeweled hands, opened Berville's collar

After a moment he removed his own cloak, doubled it, placed it under Berville's head, and came to his feet. He was speechless, gripped by utter amazement. Mechanically he looked back along the road, saw a clump of horsemen coming along, and got his own horses over beneath the oak. Then he stood looking down, wonder in his eyes. For Berville was no man, but woman.

When those blue eyes opened, Vaugon knelt and helped her to sit up.

"Your pardon," he said gently. "I could not guess, madame—I did not know——"

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"Did I faint? Oh! So you know the secret now, eh?" Berville scrambled erect, looked at Vaugon with a quick laugh, and quite without any embarrassment. Vaugon nodded, and was much the more confused of the two.

"Yes. Once more, I ask your pardon—for many things."

Berville's hand came out warmly to his. "Ah, no need, my friend! There's no need—ah!" Into Berville's face came a rush of color, the blue eyes sparkled suddenly. "Look, look! They've come at last—they got the message——"

The clump of riders were coming indeed, spurring their horses now, half a dozen of them in all. Next moment they were reining in, dismounting, and the stupefied Vaugon watched them crowding around with almost ceremonious bows. He glanced at Berville in curiosity—who was she, whom they greeted as "Madame" with every respect? She caught his look and broke into a laugh.

"Welcome, welcome, friends!" she cried eagerly. "Let me present a very dear friend and comrade, *Sieur Vaugon*. And—leave us for a little moment, then I'll ride with you."

They bowed, one and all. Vaugon saw they were

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no mere roadrunners, but gentlemen, nobles, men of high position. They withdrew a space, and Berville turned.

"And you never guessed!" She put out both hands to him, warmly. "I'm Marie de Chevreuse, comrade. Where's Plessis?"

The Duchesse de Chevreuse—ah! Vaugon colored a little as he bowed above her fingers. He might have guessed, yes!

"Gone to Paris with Cyrano, madame," he said. "Comte de Fleury is dead."

"Dead? Good!" She caught her breath, then cried out swiftly. "Good! Then come with us—we ride to Sedan, out of France! Come! the princes are there, I'll be there—and we're comrades, all of us. I guarantee you protection, alliance, restoration of your name and rights——"

"Stop, stop!" exclaimed Vaugon, for the moment confused, dazzled.

Marie de Rohan, Duchesse de Chevreuse—confidant of the queen, sworn enemy of Richelieu, paramour of an emperor and many another, the most beautiful and licentious woman of her age—this was Berville, then! No wonder the Sieur de Gisy had been so bitter—no doubt he was one of those

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she had ruined; marshals, ministers, ambassadors, princes, even more than one sovereign, had lost much for Marie de Rohan.

"You can't go to Paris," she hurried on. "That would be suicide—join us! We'll make Issy, cross the Seine at Passy, circle around to Montmartre and be clear of Paris before we halt tonight. And ahead waits everything—rank, friends, safety! More, I'll tell you a secret, comrade—you! What not a dozen people know——"

Vaugon scarce heard what she went on to say, for he was still confused.

"—all arranged, you see? I've won over Sarmiento, governor of the Low Countries—he sends Spanish troops to aid us, others come from Austria. Guyenne rises in revolt at the same moment. Comte de Soissons raises the standard at Sedan, with the whole force of Lorraine behind us; an army is gathering even now——"

Yes, she could well guarantee him his rank, wealth, friends! This still beautiful, tireless, reckless adventuress, she who had fought Richelieu these fifteen years tooth and nail—she might well offer him these things! But there was no time to argue, to plead. Chevreuse was riding for her life now,

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these cavaliers would meet block or Bastille unless they got clear swiftly.

"Montmorenci is dead, dear madame," he said, and as he met her gaze his gray eyes were very clear and serene. "Your secret is safe with me. Nicolas Vaugon lives—and goes to Paris. I thank you for your offer, for your friendship——"

"In the devil's name, don't be a fool!" she cried sharply. "Why this folly?"

"Plessis might ask that," and Vaugon smiled. She comprehended instantly.

"You're in love with that wench? Then you're done for, fool—finished!"

Vaugon shrugged. "I win or lose all, madame, for Nicolas Vaugon!"

Chevreuse leaned forward impetuously, caught him by the shoulders, embraced him.

"Farewell, fool, glorious fool—you're the sort of man I like!" she exclaimed, then swung about to the waiting party. "To horse, gentlemen—for Sedan!"

There was quick mounting—Chevreuse was in her saddle ere Vaugon could assist her. She leaned over and gave him a strong grip of the hand.

"Luck to you—heaven knows you need it!"

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"And a safe journey to you," he responded, then watched them sweep off at a sharp gallop, in haste to leave the highway and cut north.

With a shrug at destiny dismissed, Nicolas Vaugon mounted and slowly jogged along again for Paris—and a madder destiny than had just offered.

CHAPTER XI

THE old lion of France was wasting slowly, steadily, and like many ill men, he was not to be lightly thwarted or faced with any tale of failure—Richelieu did not forgive failure. The disease gradually consuming him, draining his body of blood, had but one end; less than three centuries later, this disease might have been stayed or cured a very simple operation—not the first time the course of history hung upon the discoveries of medicine.

In the Palais Cardinal, the stately pile he had reared as rival to the Louvre, the ruler of France made the evening very trying for all around him. He had heard of the death of his relative, Comte de Fleury, by one of the gentlemen who had witnessed it. His caustic tongue, his bitter notes and comments, his merciless disregard of human frailty, were never more pronounced; even Chavigny watched his step carefully that evening.

The only person to escape was Guilio Mazarini—

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not because the Italian was immune, but because his defenses were impregnable. Behind his spoken word was ever another, unspoken. He had the gift, not of meeting an attack with defense, but of guiding that attack whither he wished it to break and shatter.

"Who!" Richelieu looked up from his work with a frown, as Mazarin murmured a word in his ear. "M. d'Artagnan—oh! Yes, yes, at once. Wait! Is he alone?"

"Alone, Monseigneur," lisped the Italian.

A sardonic gleam shot through the eyes of Richelieu, and he gestured silent assent as he relaxed on his cushions.

D'Artagnan had purposely delayed his arrival, so that news of Fleury's death might precede him. On his way through the anterooms, he had received warnings in plenty—it was known he had killed Fleury. Imperturbable even to the warning Mazarin lisped to him, he nodded careless greeting here and there, and now, entering and saluting the cardinal, he seemed to gather himself, summon up every atom of his native shrewdness. He faced emergency, and was well aware of his peril.

"You may retire, M. de Mazarin," said Richelieu to the secretary, who bowed and withdrew. "Well,

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M. d'Artagnan? It is evident that I am growing old and losing my memory. As I recall the affair, I ordered you not to come before me without this M. Vaugon. Or am I in error?"

"Your Eminence is quite correct," said d'Artagnan, with perfect self-possession, and even smiled slightly as he met the savage gaze. He knew very well that Richelieu knew all about Fleury's death—but he was not supposed to know it. "I have the honor to believe," he went on composedly, "that I was sent on this errand for two reasons. First, because I knew *Sieur Vaugon* by sight. Second, because I possess a certain intelligence."

"A cadet of the guards can display only one sign of intelligence—by obeying orders. You were sent to arrest this *Vaugon*."

"I arrested him, Your Eminence," was the cool retort.

"Eh?" The shaggy gray brows went up. "Are you jesting with me, *monsieur*?"

"I would not so presume, Your Eminence. I take for granted you are not interested in the reasons of failure——"

Richelieu gestured impatiently. "You arrested him? But he is not with you. Why?"

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"Because his passport, signed by the king, enabled him to call upon any royal officer for aid. This morning at Chatillon, he made that demand of the provost, who obeyed."

The cardinal's thin lips curved sardonically.

"Is that what you term intelligence, M. d'Artagnan—thus abandoning your prisoner and returning here alone in defiance of orders?"

"By no means, Monseigneur. When this mission was confided to me, Your Eminence made certain remarks which led me to believe *Sieur Vaugon* was a woman."

"Well?"

"This, Monseigneur, is not the case."

Richelieu struck his bell. Mazarin entered, almost too quickly.

"The report regarding *Mlle. de Closset*, if you please."

"Instantly, Monseigneur."

Within ten seconds, indeed, Mazarin laid a paper in the cardinal's hand, gave d'Artagnan an uneasy glance, and withdrew. Richelieu glanced at the paper.

"*Sieur Vaugon*," he said harshly, "was no other than *Mme. de Chevreuse* in disguise. She came to

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the Chateau de Closset one evening, departing almost at once. Next morning Mlle. de Closset rode away and joined her."

"Mlle. de Closset is now in Paris," said d'Artagnan. The cardinal looked up.

"You know that? How?"

"I have been with her and with Vaugon for some time, Monseigneur. I can assure you with the utmost certainty that Vaugon is no woman disguised, but a man."

"Hm!" Richelieu frowned, his eyes very sharp. "How can you be certain?"

"Only last night, Your Eminence, we shared the same room at the inn of the Loup Pendu, after I had arrested *Sieur Vaugon*."

Richelieu stared hard at him for a moment.

"Hm! And Fleury fought a duel with him at Berny—perhaps, perhaps! If a man, then whom could he be?"

"Your Eminence, he assured me that he was really *Sieur Nicolas Vaugon*."

"No such person exists. So he's not Chevreuse—yet she is in France, was nearly caught, but managed to get away! You say Mlle. de Closset is now in Paris?"

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"So I believe, Your Eminence. Unfortunately, I met with interference on the road this morning. You will recall my orders to keep *Sieur Vaugon* unharmed——"

Richelieu's eye flashed. "*M. d'Artagnan*, tell me instantly what you have to say, and no more beating around the bush. Out with it!"

D'Artagnan bowed. He told of meeting *Comte de Fleury*, and of how it had ended. Richelieu listened impassively until the recital was done.

"You killed him—and you boast to me of it?"

"No, Your Eminence." *D'Artagnan* showed the slight wound at his throat. "I defended myself and my prisoner, as was my duty."

"Duty! You cub of a cadet, to prate of duty——"

"To France, Your Eminence! It was this brought me on to Paris."

The sharp, pregnant words drove home. For an instant the eyes of the two men met and held in a singular sort of conflict, and then Richelieu frowned.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked sharply.

"I arrested *Vaugon* in order to secure a letter in his possession—Your Eminence was most explicit in desiring any documents seized." *D'Artagnan* produced the sealed epistle, which bore no super-

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scription. "I believe this letter to be of the utmost importance to France, Monseigneur, and to you personally. Therefore, in the light of my highest duty, I came——"

"Give it to me," and Richelieu held out his thin, slender hand.

He took the letter, regarded the wax seal with a slight frown, tore it open carefully without hurting the seal-print, and held the writing to the candles. As he read, he changed countenance; a sudden alert gleam shone in his eyes, and his thin lips tightened. Slowly every particle of color drained out of his face. With an effort, he rose, thrust the letter inside his soutane, and began to pace up and down before the fireplace, eyes on the floor, momentarily forgetful of the guardsman.

D'Artagnan caught these signs of agitation very complacently. He was certain that Cyrano had there jotted down the details of the plot against Richelieu, so Vaugon might give them to the cardinal. Since he, not Vaugon, had presented them, everything was for the best!

Had he been aware of the shabby trick Cyrano was playing him in this letter, he would not have been so confident.

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"*Vae Solis!*" murmured Richelieu, almost sadly. "Woe to him who stands alone—and am I then so alone? Cinq-Mars would dare thus far, from words to acts! If——" He checked himself, halted, drove a sharp look at the guardsman.

"M. d'Artagnan, are you aware of the contents of this paper?"

"Of its purport, yes. Of its precise contents, no."

Richelieu regarded him steadily for a long moment.

"Do you know where Vaugon is at this moment?"

"In Paris, I believe. He spoke of coming on here alone."

"Describe the man to me minutely, if you please—every feature and detail."

D'Artagnan was more than a little astonished at the minister's sharp interest in Vaugon at such a moment, and at receiving no word of thanks for the warning; however, he obeyed the command. Richelieu frowned suddenly and interrupted his description.

"Wait! Has he a small mole, triangular in shape, just before his ear?"

"He has such a mole, Your Eminence."

"So!" An expression of blank amazement came

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into Richelieu's face, then was gone. He tapped his bell, sank into his chair, and gathered up his robe around his knees. Mazarin entered and bowed.

"A blank order of arrest, if you please."

Mazarin went to a secretary, opened it, and produced a form already signed by the king and minister, which he brought to the table. Richelieu took the letter from his breast and carefully tore off one of the wax seals, while Mazarin eyed the document sharply and then drove a sudden glance at d'Artagnan. The cardinal extended the seal.

"If possible, discover at once to whom these arms belong. Send Chavigny to me."

Mazarin withdrew. After a moment Chavigny entered the room.

"Ah! You've heard of M. de Fleury's death?"

Chavigny assented in gloomy silence.

"Mlle. de Closset," went on the cardinal's dry, precise voice, "has defied the king's wishes, and by her disobedience has caused much trouble. Have an order in council issued tomorrow, declaring her entire properties forfeit to the state. It must be signed and put into full execution before tomorrow night. This point is important, since she will cease to be a royal ward in another day or two."

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D'Artagnan could not repress a look of appreciation. Having failed to obtain the de Closset fortune by marriage, Richelieu was now obtaining it by a much simpler method—that of seizure.

"Do you recall the affray of a week or so ago on the highway near Lonjumeau," went on the cardinal, "when Mme. de Chevreuse was supposedly recognized in disguise and was nearly taken? The report just made by M. d'Artagnan confirms this as a fact—it must have been Chevreuse in person. She was not using the name of Vaugon, as we had thought, but another. If we knew that other name——"

D'Artagnan made a gesture. The cardinal looked at him swiftly, sardonically.

"You were about to speak, monsieur?"

"The other name, Monseigneur, is that of Chevalier de Berville."

"Eh?" Richelieu's eyes lighted up. "You know that, monsieur?"

"I suspect it, Your Eminence. I have heard such a person discussed."

"Good. Chavigny, send word to the frontier to stop anyone of such a name for most thorough investigation."

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Chavigny assented silently, and was dismissed with a gesture. Richelieu leaned over the table, dipped a quill, and wrote a few words on the blank order of arrest. He sanded it and shoved it across the table.

"This, M. d'Artagnan, will serve to annul the precious passport of our friend Sieur Vaugon," he said, and gave the cadet a long look. "You are a very shrewd young man," and the suavity of his voice concealed a sarcastic note. "You believe in carrying out your duty at all costs, do you not?"

"At all costs, Your Eminence."

Impassive as he appeared, d'Artagnan could not help glancing down at the order of arrest on the table. When he saw there not his own name but that of Vaugon, he exhaled a slight breath of relief. He now knew there must have been something most peculiar about Cyrano's letter, and cursed himself for not having slid a hot knife under the seal and examined that letter before its delivery.

"Monsieur, I admire your devotion to duty," said the cardinal, still with the same ominous undertone. "I predict it will lead you either to a marshal's baton or to the Bastille. If my memory still serves, I promised you full commission as a guardsman, pro-

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vided you succeeded in your mission? Well, you failed."

He leaned forward, picked up the order of arrest, and read over what he had written, then nodded and looked up.

"You are hereby empowered to seize the person of Sieur Nicolas Vaugon and bring him to my presence, this order taking precedence of any previous order or act—and over His Majesty's signature and my own," he said, and extended the paper. D'Artagnan took it with a bow. "You have until tomorrow night, monsieur, to perform this errand—to gain either a guardsman's cassock or a cell."

"I choose the cassock, Monseigneur," said d'Artagnan with an effort at lightness.

"So you said before, I think. Hm! My tragedy of *Rachel* is to be performed at the Luxembourg tomorrow evening—later, I'm to attend the ball at the Louvre and sup with the king. Yes, there's time enough. Attention, monsieur! The performance ends slightly before eight-thirty. At precisely eight-forty, my carriage will be in the courtyard below here. I shall remain in the carriage, and shall expect you to present Sieur Vaugon to me at that

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time. I must myself see if he is the man I think him to be. You fully understand?"

"Fully, Your Eminence." D'Artagnan bowed, and so departed.

"Poor Vaugon!" thought the cadet, as he left the room. "This time, Richelieu has certainly placed his identity aright—well, I warned him! Now he goes back to the Bastille, and no escape either."

In the antechamber, where a number of people awaited audience, d'Artagnan saw Mazarin make a slight gesture. He followed through other rooms, until they were alone behind a closed door.

"You're ordered to arrest Vaugon?" lisped the Italian. D'Artagnan assented.

"To arrest and bring him to Richelieu—diantre! He's done for now! As I told you before seeing the cardinal, he insisted on returning to Paris. It seems that Richelieu had believed him to be a woman in disguise—no other, indeed, than Mme. de Chevreuse."

Mazarin only smiled—this was no news to him, since he had provoked this very error.

"Then His Eminence has discovered the mistake?" he inquired.

"Yes. It seems he's learned that Chevreuse is

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another person—going under the name of M. de Berville, I think.”

A sharp pallor struck into Mazarin's face for an instant.

“You can find M. Vaugon, then?” he asked.

“Unluckily I can, and I must,” said d'Artagnan frankly. “At least, I know where to look. Now, where is the paper he asked me to bring from you—the document bearing the king's signature, promising him a certain reward for his errand?”

“Softly, softly, m'sou!” said the Italian reflectively. “If you are quite certain that you can and must arrest this M'sou Vaugon——”

“I am,” said d'Artagnan. “Under the circumstances, I have no choice.”

“Excellent, then!” Mazarin sighed in mock resignation. “Undoubtedly, my dear M. d'Artagnan, the best thing is to perform your duty to the very letter! The best course possible. Nothing must interfere with duty. It is the cardinal virtue of a soldier!”

D'Artagnan eyed him sharply. The sly Italian had been listening at the door, then—meant the thrust for him! How much had the man overheard?

“Well, where is the paper Vaugon demanded? I must take it to him, or send it, without delay.”

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"Alas, m'sou, I know nothing of it!" said Mazarin with a helpless gesture. It was entirely clear that he had decided to abandon Vaugon to his fate, but d'Artagnan was not giving up the battle so easily. "Nothing! At least—hm! Let me think, now—is it possible that I did put that paper in my other pocket?"

"The evening is early, and my dinner can wait, if you desire to look," suggested d'Artagnan. "As I told you, M. de Mazarin, all Vaugon's hopes depend on the possession of that paper. You might go and look for it."

"An excellent idea!" approved Mazarin, but without hastening to obey the suggestion. "By the way, m'sou, did you not bring some sort of letter to His Eminence—a letter bearing a seal in red wax?"

D'Artagnan started slightly—so this was it, eh? Well, no harm now in bartering, since the letter was delivered. The least he could do for Vaugon, he reflected generously, was to secure the document at any cost. Since Mazarin had resolved to abandon Vaugon as a tool no longer useful, the document must be obtained.

"Why, yes—a letter of a personal nature, confided to me for His Eminence," he rejoined lightly. "It

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contained some rather interesting information, of which I have the general purport. Come, M. Mazarin!" he added. "You find the paper Vaugon needs, and I'll tell you what was in the letter to Richelieu, or its purport. Word of honor! Agreed?"

Mazarin appeared not to hear this proposal. He was exploring a pocket, and upon his smooth swarthy features came an expression of astonishment.

"Hold—hold—a hole in this pocket!" he exclaimed. "And upon my word, a paper fallen into the lining! If by any chance—yes, here it is, the very one of which we were speaking! Ah, what good luck, M. d'Artagnan! But you were about to say something, I believe?"

He glanced at the paper in his hand, then peered at d'Artagnan, who smothered a curse and then laughed openly.

"Why, yes! The letter related the details of a plot against His Eminence—a plot in which M. le Grand is the leading actor, to go into effect sometime this week, I think. Is that sufficient?"

It was. For one swift instant a mortal pallor swept across the sleek visage of the Italian. This told d'Artagnan everything—told him Mazarin not

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only knew about the plot, but was probably concerned in it most vitally. Then, forcing a mirthless smile, Mazarin thrust the document into the cadet's hand.

"Here it is, M. d'Artagnan," he said in a stifled voice. "Here it is—but I fear it will do M. Vaugon no good. Adieu!"

D'Artagnan saluted, turned and departed.

As he left the room, and the velvet hangings dropped behind him, he checked himself, turned, peered back between the curtains. Mazarin still stood in the center of the room, but now, where there was none to see, his face was contorted in an expression of silent, indescribable fury. D'Artagnan whistled to himself and made all haste to get out of the Palais Cardinal and find some dinner.

"Now the devil's let loose!" he told himself. "Luckily, that Italian cat doesn't know who Vaugon really is. Still more luckily, he doesn't know Bergerac wrote the letter of warning—or Cyrano would pay dearly! The seal might betray him—but no, I think he's safe. Well, to the deuce with it all! And thanks be to the saints, Richelieu didn't ask for his horses back!"

Mazarin, meantime, was making his way through the anterooms, speaking to one and another, and

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waited there until the cardinal was alone. Then he entered Richelieu's presence, and laid on the table the wax seal from Cyrano's letter.

"Monseigneur," he said softly, "I was just given a message from the soothsayer in the Rue Monge—the Sardinian who tells fortunes. He sent word that on no account must you go to the Louvre on Saturday next or take part in the reception of the English ambassador."

Richelieu gave him a sharp, startled glance.

"I do not accept orders from soothsayers, M. de Mazarin," he said drily, and struck his bell. "Wait, if you please. Send Chavigny."

In a moment Chavigny entered the room.

"Monsieur," said the cardinal, "do you happen to recall what dispositions have been made regarding my going in state to the Louvre on Saturday, and to the reception of the English ambassador? What guards will accompany me?"

Mazarin stood very still, and his face was like old wax as he listened.

"The company of M. de Treville is to accompany you," answered Chavigny.

"Change the orders," said Richelieu. "Request,

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instead, that the company of M. des Essarts be assigned to duty here on Saturday. That is all."

Chavigny bowed and departed. Richelieu took up the wax seal.

"And this, M. de Mazarin?"

In the dark eyes of the Italian, as he came forward, was a malignant, swiftly-shaded glitter.

"These arms, Monseigneur, are borne without any right whatever by a gentleman of the guards, company of Casteljaloux. His name is Savinien de Cyrano, or de Bergerac. He is a Parisian by birth and family, though he is commonly taken for a Gascon."

It was evident that Mazarin had made quick, sharp work of his investigation.

"Yes?" murmured Richelieu, looking at the seal. "This is all very singular."

"It was this Bergerac," purred Mazarin, "who accompanied the mysterious Sieur Vaugon on his visit to the Carmelites, when a certain lady was interviewed!"

"Oh!" Richelieu looked up suddenly, as though he now understood something that had puzzled him. "*Sa Majesté!*"

"*Sa Mazesté,*" assented Mazarin. "This Bergerac

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is known as a most dissipated character, a roistering poet, a duellist who makes rhymes as he fights——”

“Ballads?” asked Richelieu drily.

“His duels never last long enough, Eminent Signor—he is forced to make roundels or triolets, I believe, since he invariably kills his man within a few moments. This, of course, is mere gossip. The edict against duelling is laughed at by him. It was he who killed M. de Breuil a week or ten days ago, at Berny.”

Richelieu waited, a question in his eyes. He knew more was coming, knew the climax was at hand—and he was right. Mazarin went on smoothly, suavely, yet with words that drove home hard.

“When Madame de Chevreuse was so nearly taken near Lonjumeau some days ago,” and a flicker of vengeful triumph shone in his dark eyes, “it was this same M. de Bergerac who intervened, and who caused her escape. He was recognized.”

The long, firm fingers of Richelieu closed upon the wax seal and crushed it, with a slow and powerful gesture. Mazarin, however, was far from done. He had put his victim in the net—now he had to draw closer the meshes.

“If you recall, Monseigneur,” pursued the subtle

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Italian, "the passport for *Sieur Vaugon* was secured by *M. Cinq-Mars*, according to the report made by the clerks of the seals. I made the unfortunate error of thinking *Vaugon* was *Mme. de Chevreuse* in disguise, when apparently he was a mere messenger.

"It is now obvious," he went on, "that *Bergerac* has been more active than we had supposed. Evidently it was he, and not *Vaugon*, who bore a commission from Her Majesty—and we can guess to whom the commission was destined. If *Chevreuse*, or if *Cinq-Mars* or others, were attempting to form some new conspiracy against Your Eminence——"

Mazarin paused, for *Richelieu* had stiffened slightly at this. He concluded curtly.

"Then, this *M. de Bergerac* is undoubtedly the key to the whole affair!"

"Ah!" murmured *Richelieu*. "You are right, my dear *Mazarin*—upon my word, you are right! It fits in excellently."

Something was slightly amiss, but impossible to tell what—*Richelieu* was smiling. *Mazarin* waited, a thing at which he was very good. He did not know what was in the letter *Richelieu* had received, but if he had known its exact wording he could not have spoken with more subtle penetration.

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The cardinal drew a sharp breath, and was about to speak, when Chavigny suddenly entered the room.

"Yes?" Richelieu looked at him. "Speak freely."

"Half an hour ago, Your Eminence," said Chavigny, "a gentleman appeared at the Louvre and asked for M. le Comte de Guitet, captain of Her Majesty's guards. He spoke with Guitet for a moment, then was taken to the private apartments of Her Majesty. It appears this gentleman was no other than Mlle. de Closset."

Richelieu's lip twisted in its sardonic grimace.

"Very well. Don't neglect the order regarding the forfeiture of her estates. If Her Majesty wishes that young lady in the Louvre, she's entirely welcome. By the way, I think there has been some disregard lately of the edict against dueling?"

"Unhappily yes, Your Eminence. The matter of M. de Fleury this morning——"

"Was not a duel, but an attack upon an officer, and wholly unjustified."

Chavigny bowed. "At present three gentlemen are under arrest for various matters——"

"You recall the death of M. de Breuil at Berny, something over a week ago?"

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"Certainly, Your Eminence. A certain M. de Bergerac——"

"Exactly," said Richelieu. "You will kindly have this Bergerac arrested and brought to me. I wish to interrogate him myself, and we shall afford the gentlemen of our guard an example they'll remember. Bring him to me here tomorrow night."

Chavigny departed. Richelieu pulled his chair to the table and took up his quill. Mazarin melted into the shadows with a quiet smile.

CHAPTER XII

EVENING had come before Vaugon's stumbling nag brought him into Paris, unquestioned and unhindered.

He jogged along the narrow streets toward the Seine in no little perplexity as to his course. Delay was dangerous, he knew well; he must seek out the king immediately, yet this he could not well do without the paper from Mazarin, unless he used the passport to prove identity. Yet, how to seek the king? He was totally ignorant of ways and means, knowing little of procedure at the Louvre. Cyrano could instruct him there, however, and he counted on d'Artagnan bringing him the written promise which would be redeemed by Louis.

His most immediate need was to get some dinner, and to rid himself of the horse—the sorry animal only rendered him conspicuous here in Paris. Then rose the question of his shabby garments; but he could replace these at Cyrano's lodgings, for Cyrano had no lack of clothes.

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"I must be close to that auberge in Rue Ci-Git-Le-Cœur," thought Vaugon, "where I found horse and sword! Therefore, leave them again, get a bite, look up Cyrano."

Thus it was no ploy of the fates, but sheer inexorable cause and effect, which led him on the road destined to set all Paris laughing before the morrow's noon.

Inquiring his way, he soon found himself in St. Germain, and presently turned into the narrow street with the sentimental name. When he dismounted in the courtyard of the Cloche, he called for the host. It was early dinner hour, and Vaugon had the entire evening ahead.

"Ten days or so ago," he said, when the host appeared, "a gentleman waited here with a horse for me—M. Vaugon. Do you remember the circumstance?"

The host bowed, threw a glance at the horse, and his jaw fell.

"Perfectly, monsieur, perfectly, but what a devil of a change in the animal!"

"It is not the same," and Vaugon laughed. "However, I'll leave it for the gentleman who was here. If he doesn't claim the horse, it's yours."

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"Hm!" said the host dubiously. "He left word regarding the horse and sword, m'sieu, asking that I send both to the Hotel de Nevers if you returned them."

Vaugon removed his baldric.

"The sword's more important to him than the horse—here it is. Good! I need some dinner at once."

In ten minutes he was appeasing the inner man with much satisfaction. Food and wine can lend a remarkably roseate hue to lowering clouds. Owing to his sorry horse, Cyrano must have arrived some hours ahead of him, so Plessis was undoubtedly taken care of ere this and safely bestowed at the Louvre.

His best plan would be to seek Cyrano's lodgings in Rue St. Etienne, rather than take chances on the Pinecone. With this resolve, Vaugon paid his score and set out afoot. On gaining the quay, he turned to the left, heading for the Pont Neuf rather than the closer bridge of Notre Dame.

He was now in no great haste, and walked along slowly, for his recent wound was still a bit troublesome. An enjoyable sense of safety descended upon him, thanks, probably, to the crowds around, to the

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lights, to the insignificance of one lone man in a whole city. And ahead was opening out before him the strangest scene in Paris of the day, the Pont Neuf.

It was far more than a bridge alone. It was a promenade lined with booths, a perpetual street fair, aflame with torches and cressets, where great braziers of glowing charcoal warmed the chill air of winter and where all the mountebanks, jugglers and street merchants of Paris were assembled. From the bridge and its approaches ascended the raucous merriment of an ever-changing crowd, a shrill and joyous babble of voices. As the proverb said, one could not cross the bridge without meeting a girl, a monk and a white horse, and this diversity of scene never lacked.

Certainly there were girls enough this night, and no very modest ones either, while more than a few monkish cowls appeared in the throngs surging about the open-air spectacles. As it was the dinner hour, when most lackeys were free, they had gathered here in throngs—impudent, brazen rascals for the most part, quarreling among themselves, aping the manners of their masters, rapiers acock under cloak and oaths hot on their lips. Above all

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this swaggering crowd rose the bronze statue of Henri Quatre, seeming to preside from his horse over the whole joyous and merry madness of the scene.

Vaugon found himself suddenly entrained and carried along in a rush of the "rainbow regiment," as the gaily liveried lackeys were named. Just to one side the bridge entrance, opposite the Rue Guénégaud, where a little tower arose over the river, was the marionette theater of one Jean Briocci, and this had suddenly become the center of attention for all the crowd of swaggering rascals, to whom the carrying of arms had not yet been forbidden by law.

This was not because of the flaming, smoking cressets lighting the scene, nor because of the marionette-play, which had not yet begun, but because of the extraordinary creature strutting up and down in front of the stage, to the orders of his master. Small wonder the crowd rushed and gaped and guffawed, small wonder Vaugon himself was nothing loath to pause and stare in amusement!

Briocci and his assistant, both of them nimble-tongued enough, were firing back and forth volleys of repartee calculated to gain and hold an audience,

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but it was neither the master of marionettes nor his clownish aide, but the central figure, on which all attention was fashioned.

This was the figure of a monkey.

No small monkey, but nearly man-sized, the beast was excellently trained. For all his malignant simian aspect, he was harmless enough, and unchained. He wore a cavalier's plumed hat, a gay suit, high boots, and at his side hung a blunt-pointed sword. Grimacing, shaking his head at the laughing throng around, he caught a word from his master and drew his rapier nimbly enough. He presented it at the circle of lackeys, made the pass or two which had been taught him, and chattered excitedly. There was a roar of laughter. Vaugon, now wedged tightly in to one side of the scene, found the thing ludicrous enough.

He wondered ironically what these men would say if they knew the secret lodged in his head—that civil war was bursting upon France, foreign war returning, the cardinal about to be assassinated—and all these things from the intrigues of a woman! But he must keep his mouth shut about Soissons and the political affair; Chevreuse had trusted him

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there as a comrade, and it was not his place to let the news slip out.

"Fagotin!" exclaimed Briocci sharply, amid a lull. Here was another jest—the monkey had a name, and knew it! "Fagotin, I see a gentleman of His Majesty's guards approaching!"

Instantly, Fagotin brought his rapier to the salute.

"No, I mistake," said Briocci. "The gentleman is a Cardinalist—"

On the word, Fagotin lowered his sword and made a very different sort of gesture. The crowd broke into wild howls of mirth, for the Cardinal was richly hated by all Paris. Even Vaugon smiled and came out of his abstraction. There was something undeniably ludicrous about this Fagotin, this beast so nearly like a man, and fully as large as some of the men around. The throng, constantly gaining in numbers, pressed in more closely. Vaugon, squeezed against a wall, could scarce move a muscle.

"Ah!" suddenly cried out Briocci, peering at the crowd. "Here's luck, my masters—here's luck for our poor Fagotin! All he lacks to make a man of him is to have a real nose—you comprehend? Come,

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you over there! We'll make a trade with you! We'll trade half a tail for half a nose, and all will be well balanced!"

Vaugon could not make out who was being addressed, but shouts of laughter began to spread, and the throngs swirled. For a moment, Vaugon caught sight of a handsomely attired figure, apparently a gentleman, but it was shut from his sight almost immediately. Briocci continued his impudent tirade, and presently one of the lackeys took it up with a loud and more direct assault.

"Ho, m'sieu! You there with the nose! Come and make the trade with Fagotin, d'you hear! Here, I'll help you."

A sharp, cold presentiment seized on Vaugon. The nose—could it be? If so, he knew what must happen. He made an effort, strove to fight his way through the crowd. An opening showed ahead. He saw the shouting lackey receive a tremendous kick in the rear that sent him flying half across the bridge-head.

"Canaille! Street-sweepings!" bellowed a voice all too familiar. It was drowned in a storm of shouts. In a flash, the temper of the throng was turned from laughter to ugly and vicious anger.

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Vaugon endeavored desperately to force a passage, but in vain. He saw the lackays all around him whipping forth rapiers, heard their furious imprecations, while Briocci attempted shrilly but vainly to quiet the upraised tumult. Then swords flashed in the ruddy flares, and over the uproar rose the shrill and terrible scream of a man dying.

His own shouts drowned in the confusion, Vaugon devoted himself to forcing a passage through the mass. Cyrano or not, here were twenty or thirty lackeys with weapons bared, and it would not be the first or last time that a gentleman went down under the blades of the rainbow regiment, smothered by their numbers.

Little by little Vaugon wormed clear. By the time he gained the outskirts, he knew the affair was serious enough. The girls had gone shrieking away, and the throng had become a milling whirlpool of armed men swirling madly about a focal point. Clear at last, Vaugon found a yelling lackey blocking him. He buffeted the fellow, tore the sword from him, then flung forward.

Cyrano indeed—and what a Cyrano!

Plumed out in all the finery he could muster, Cyrano was a gay figure; also, he was undoubtedly

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drunk. He stood with his back to the marionette enclosure, bawling forth oaths entirely lost in the uproar, and before him was an open space crossed by the glitter of swords in the ruddy light.

Around him was a wall of attacking steel, two figures lay prostrate, and his long blade glowed and flickered back and forth as the crowd pressed in. Drunk or not, Cyrano was superbly master of his weapon, and the ring of steel could not pass his guard. Abruptly, Cyrano gathered himself in a burst of fury, and leaped. The one man charged the thirty.

For an instant he not only charged but broke them. His blade licked home again and again, faster than eye could follow; men staggered, sank down, broke away howling from that frightful rapier-flash. Then a swirl came surging in from one side, Cyrano was all but carried off his feet, and they were in at him from behind.

Somehow Vaugon found himself there in time, caught a yell of recognition from Cyrano, and came back to back with his friend. The blades scraped in furious lunges, thrusts, wild slashes. A man went down, another staggered away—cleared again! Cyrano had regained his first position,

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Vaugon now at his side, and once more the encircling wall of steel came flashing in around them.

"Well met, comrade!" Cyrano's bellow was exultant. "At them, now—at them!"

The voice of Briocci came from behind in a wild lifting shriek.

"Fagotin! To me, you devil's imp—Fagotin! To me!"

Startled cries from all sides, a sidelong surging burst of the crowd. Vaugon stared in amazement. Cyrano was engaged with two lackeys in front, when suddenly a third broke in upon him. A third? No—not a lackey, but Fagotin the monkey, chattering shrilly, driving in his pointless rapier—gone frantic with excitement and the mad confusion all around.

Now blades reached for Vaugon, held him desperately engaged. From the corner of his eye he saw Cyrano stagger, as the blunt point of Fagotin went driving home to his ribs. In the flickering light, in the dust and tumult, Cyrano sensed only another assailant, and with a sidelong leap he disengaged and thrust viciously in response.

Fagotin, pierced through the throat, went over in a grotesque dying heap.

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"The monkey!" went up a wild yell. "The monkey! He's killed Fagotin!"

The encircling rapiers drew away. A laugh started up, and grew into a shaking roar of hysterical mirth. Only now did Cyrano realize what he had just done. For an instant he stood transfixed, staring at the dead monkey. Then an oath burst from him, and he went at the crowd like a madman.

He broke them, drove them headlong before him, Vaugon assisting; raving wild curses, he beat them with the flat of his sword, kicked, struck. And through all the uproar came a high piercing whistle, a sharper yell. The archers of the watch had arrived.

Fortunately, they did not come by way of the island and bridge, but along the quay, toward which Cyrano was driving his hapless assailants. Vaugon, waking to the emergency, caught his comrade's arm and checked him.

"The watch, Cyrano! Here, across the bridge—quick!"

"Right," panted Cyrano, with a nod, and dashed the sweat from his eyes. "Run for it!"

Cyrano sheathed his sword, Vaugon dropped his

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borrowed blade, and together they sped into and among the circling crowd, now in panic and forgetful of everything. They worked their way past the statue of Henri Quatre, and at length, slowing into a fast walk, were striding between the booths along the garbage-studded street. The riot and tumult were fallen behind. They were safe.

Neither man spoke at once, until Vaugon was aware of a low and frightful groan, seemingly wrenched from the very soul of his companion. Thinking Cyrano wounded, perhaps, he kept silence until they might be out of the passing throng. They came opposite the water-house of the Samaritaine, with its high pictured story of Christ and the woman of Samaria, just as the chimes of its great clock were ringing out nine.

Cyrano halted. A stifled sob broke from him. He seized his sword, bared it, whirled it up around his head, and sent the blade end over end out into the river. The passing folk stared as if deeming him mad. So, too, for the moment, did Vaugon—then the other caught his arm.

"Come, come!" he exclaimed in a terrible voice. "Come, comrade—there's the end of Cyrano; come along, get wine, drown it all!"

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Vaugon was far from comprehension. With the archers at the other end of the bridge, however, this was no time for delay.

"Lead the way," he rejoined. "I was heading for your lodgings, hoping to find you. Where's Plessis?"

"At the Louvre," said Cyrano shortly, and broke into his long stride.

Leaving the bridge and its throngs behind, they plunged into the maze of narrow streets beyond, and in ten minutes had reached their destination. This was a small cabaret, empty at the moment, where Cyrano seemed well known. He headed for a table in one corner, and flung a word at the host.

"Wine—my own particular wine! Half a dozen of it, master Jacques."

"Instantly, m'sieu."

Before they were well seated, the wine arrived. Cyrano flung down money, seized a bottle, and filled the cups. On his face was stamped a fearful brooding, a perfect agony of despair.

"What in the devil's name is wrong with you?" exclaimed Vaugon, catching the other's wrist. "Are you wounded?"

"Wounded?" Cyrano glared at him, then uttered

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a harsh laugh. "Would to heaven one of those blades had gone through my body! Wounded? Aye, wounded in the soul and spirit, wounded to the very quick—done for, damned and done for!"

Lifting his cup, he emptied it in two gulps.

"But why?" demanded Vaugon, amazed and startled. "What's happened?"

"Eh?" The dark eyes blazed luridly at him. "Don't you understand—back there? Bad enough to have lost my temper, crossed swords with a pack of despicable lackeys, dishonored myself and my blade! But worse yet—that damned monkey! Ah!" Cyrano groaned, spat an oath, and reached for the bottle.

"Why worry about the monkey?" asked Vaugon.

Cyrano gulped again, set down the cup, calmed himself. He had undoubtedly reached such a point that the wine sobered him instead of inflaming him anew.

"My friend, look at me," he said, with a certain sad simplicity. "I am a man marked out from others by nature. I have little fortune, no hope in life. I'm a living laugh for other men! Well, then, those others have learned not to laugh, you comprehend? One thing I can do supremely well—

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kill those who laugh. Do you know that one night a band of assassins tried to catch my friend, poor old Lignières, and caught me instead? I killed two of them, wounded seven, and put the rest to flight. That's a sober fact, comrade—it's history—that's Cyrano de Bergerac as they tell of him in Paris, as they know him. But now—now! *Now!*"

The strong, passionate face was contorted for an instant.

"Look at me now!" and Cyrano flung out his hands. "I have slain all laughter, driven it to hiding, you understand? I have made myself respected, feared; in two campaigns I've been twice wounded, twice noted for bravery. This evening at the Louvre I met M. de Bourgogne of the Regiment de Conti; do you know how he greeted me? 'Cyrano, the first swordsman of France!' That's the honest truth, comrade. And now—now! Cyrano, the killer of monkeys. Cyrano, the battler of lackeys. Cyrano, the slayer of the immortal Fagotin. Cyrano—Cyrano the damned! Ah,—it's too much. It's the end."

Anguish in his eyes and voice, Cyrano flung his arms on the table and dropped his head in them and sat there motionless, gripped by bitter despondency.

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Vaugon saw it all now—saw the supreme tragedy of the man before him, in stark and pitiless clarity. It was true, yes; with the rapier-thrust that slew Fagotin, Cyrano had destroyed himself beyond hope. Within a few hours Paris would be rocking with laughter, from the faubourgs to the Louvre. The story would gain addition at each telling. Nothing could ever quench it—it would pass into fable. The great-nosed swordsman, the noseless monkey—here was monstrous and irresistible mirth for all Paris!

“Cyrano!” Vaugon’s hand gripped the man’s shoulder. “Come, my friend.”

Cyrano lifted a tortured face, and then broke into a wild laugh.

“Do you know what they’ll say? By the lord, I’ll say it ahead of them!” he cried vibrantly. “There’s the pun that’ll never down! *Cyrano embroche le singe de Brioche!* Cyrano spits the monkey of Signor Spit—bah! Farewell to Cyrano the swordsman. Farewell to Cyrano the soldier. I’ll never again draw rapier in this life, comrade—I swear it by my faith, by my honor—mordious, by my nose!”

“Here, fill up!” and he shoved over the bottle.

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"One thing, one thing alone, remains to me. At least, I can laugh louder than they; I can make the sting drive deeper; I can use a quill to fill all the world with gall and bitterness and raillery! Here's a health to the new Cyrano—down sword, up quill! This very night I'll resign from the guards. I vanish! We hereby baptize Cyrano the mocker, Cyrano the poet, Cyrano who attacks with his quill all the drab hypocrisy of life! Drink!"

The two cups touched. When Cyrano wiped his mustache, there was indeed a new light in his eyes. The sharpest of his passion was endured; now Vaugon saw a shadow of the old smile come back to his face, the old brave glint into his eyes, the braver for the misery so resolutely crammed down.

"A truce to poor old shabby Cyrano—he's dead, so no more of it!" Cyrano thrust out his hand. "Welcome, comrade, and thanks for your help. All's well? You caught that rascal d'Artagnan in the snare we fixed for him?"

Vaugon nodded, glad to distract the other's thoughts, and told of what had happened at Chatillon this same morning.

"I gave him the letter because I felt sorry for him—and he was grateful enough," he added in

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conclusion. Cyrano stared in round-eyed amazement. "Eh? What's the matter?"

"Mordious! You swore you'd never warn Richelieu!"

"I didn't." Vaugon smiled. "But I let d'Artagnan do it. That warning would save him from punishment, and after he had killed Fleury, I owed him something. Besides, it's a dirty trick to know a man is to be assassinated and not give him a word."

Cyrano exploded in abrupt nervous laughter that passed into wild guffaws of mirth, until he put hand to side in pain.

"Oh, what a jest, what a jest! Oh, most ineffable d'Artagnan!" he bawled. "Vaugon, you didn't know what I had written in that letter, then?"

"How the devil would I know? You wrote a warning of the plot, I supposed. You said it was to warn the cardinal."

"I did, I did, sure enough." Cyrano wiped the laughter-tears from his eyes. "But it was the manner in which I wrote it; there's the crux of it all! For the love of the saints, I'll die of this jest yet, and to think of d'Artagnan presenting that letter!

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I'd give ten years of life to have seen what happened!"

"Explain!" demanded Vaugon impatiently. "Explain!"

"Damned if I will!" roared Cyrano. "Find out for yourself. Here, comrade, look at this! Plessis went to the Louvre, you comprehend? I took her. A fine girl, that! She knew you must reach the king at once, and promised to send me cards of admission for us both. There's a ball tomorrow night, we learned, a great affair. But not for me, comrade—the old Cyrano's dead and gone. Here, come into the back room and get into these clothes—a brand new outfit, worthy any gentleman! I'll trade with you."

Vaugon protested. He did not at first comprehend the whimsical urge of his companion, but finally it drove in upon him that Cyrano had no heart for his new finery, felt the need of hiding from the sight of all men. Better, perhaps, to assent for the moment, until the wine was out of Cyrano and better sense in. He nodded and rose.

Outside, a queer face thrust itself against the thick glass of the window, peering in at the two men. It was a brutal face, scarred, unintelligent,

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more like the face of an animal than that of a man. Then it was gone again, swiftly, as they passed to the inner room of the cabaret.

From plumed beaver to shoes, Cyrano insisted on stripping and exchanging garments. His clothes fitted Vaugon well enough, and he got into the torn, stained, shabby garb of Vaugon with a laugh and a shrug at the ancient cut. He was more than unsteady on his feet. From scattered comments, Vaugon knew his first premise had been correct. Cyrano had probably been drunk when he came to the Pont Neuf.

Presently the two returned to their table in the main room. Vaugon spoke of seeking bed and quarters, but Cyrano dismissed the notion, opened another bottle, set himself to drink again. He had relapsed into a dark mood, and was intent upon drowning everything in wine. Vaugon realized more and more clearly what an appalling tragedy had taken place when Fagotin was spitted.

The last bottle had just been opened by Cyrano's unsteady fingers, when the tavern door was flung wide and into the place broke half a dozen men. Cyrano looked up, started to rise, then rolled back helplessly into his seat. Vaugon turned—and was

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petrified. Facing him were a number of the watch, and at their head, pointing to him, a brutish-faced, ill-dressed man whom he recognized on the instant.

It was the one man in all Paris who might have known his face—and who knew it. His jailer from the Bastille!

Before Vaugon could speak, before he could move, he was jerked from his seat. A cloth was flung about his head, his arms were bound, and a moment later he felt himself being carried out into the cold night air, back to death in life.

CHAPTER XIII

BEFORE that same night was gone, all Paris was howling with glee over the story of Cyrano de Bergerac and the monkey of Briocci. All Paris, that is to say, except the owner of the late Fagotin.

Signor Briocci, who like Mazarin had gallicized his name to Brioché, had no difficulty in learning the identity of the slayer, for Cyrano's face and sword were known throughout Paris. With morning, then, Briocci took unto himself much wine and a few friends, and instituted search for Cyrano through all the taverns of the city. Not finding him, and having no recourse except the law, he straightway engaged an avocat and filed suit for fifty pistoles damages.

This activity on Briocci's part only gave impetus to the story, sent it rolling afar upon a mounting wave of laughter. Long ere morning it had reached the guards' barracks, and from there it came to the Palais Cardinal, the Louvre, and the Faubourg St. Germain. By noon, half the wits of Paris were

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busy embroidering the tale, lampooning it, and enlarging upon it most fantastically.

D'Artagnan heard it in the morning, as soon as he dressed and gained the street. In order to find Vaugon, he had to find Cyrano; but M. de Bergerac had dropped completely out of sight, as a visit to his lodgings proved. While there, d'Artagnan ran into a fellow guardsman, M. Isaac de Portau, also of the company des Essarts—a large-built, rather stupid gentleman, who commonly went by the name of Porthos, thanks to a barracks jest. D'Artagnan was quick to sniff the errand of Porthos, and pried into it.

"Why, yes," returned the other easily. "Between you and me, it'll go hard with our friend if I find him! He killed M. de Breuil, you know, and I'm sent to fetch him to the Palais Cardinal in consequence. Where the devil can he be?"

"Exactly the query I'm pondering," said d'Artagnan. "I must find him in order to find another gentleman who's also wanted at the same place. Since our errands run together, my dear Porthos, why not pursue them in company?"

"Admirable thought!" declared M. de Portau.
"Agreed!"

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By noon they had encountered no luck whatever, and so sought out the Pinecone for food and wine and further information. D'Artagnan, far more worried than he cared to admit, cursed Cyrano and the monkey of Briocci most heartily. He had only until a definite hour that evening to produce Vaugon, and was under no illusions as to the result of failure.

By all report, the cardinal had entertained no great affection for his scapegrace relative, whose headstrong passions and reckless gambling had involved him in more than one dark affair; but relatives are relatives, and d'Artagnan was pointed out on all sides as the man who had killed Comte de Fleury.

It was clear, to him at least, that if he succeeded in his present errand he would be pardoned all things else; otherwise, not. Somehow, all his shrewd calculations had slipped a cog. Try as he would, he could not tell how; yet he suspected that the letter he had delivered to the cardinal was not exactly as he had thought it would be. This was another reason for finding Cyrano. He wanted most urgently to discover exactly what had been in that epistle.

At the Pinecone, the two guardsmen ran into a riotous assemblage, both of their companions in

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arms, and of the poetical and philosophical element from nearby colleges—all friends of Cyrano, and all making merry over the story of Fagotin. To them, as to all Paris, the ironic quip of the thing was irresistible—Cyrano, the deadliest swordsman of the day, slaughtering lackeys and a monkey on the Pont Neuf! The nose against the noseless—this would never down.

Lignières the poet was making epigrams on the tale, a gay crowd around him. Tristan l'Hermite, Molière, Chapelle and others from the College of Lisieux were going into roars of laughter while the huge epicure St. Amant, Comte d'Harcourt, sat at a table and recounted the story between bites and sups, as he interpreted it.

At another side, Le Bret and half a dozen other officers were talking loudly and drinking hard—but no Cyrano. To all the questions of d'Artagnan, but one response was returned; nobody had seen or heard of him. Cyrano had apparently vanished out of all human ken.

By the time their meal was finished and a second bottle discussed, d'Artagnan was uncomfortably conscious that time was slipping rapidly by. M. de Portau had nothing to suggest except another bottle,

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and blinked solemnly around and grinned at the jests in the air. D'Artagnan's uneasiness grew, for all were talking about Cyrano's disappearance.

"Perhaps," suggested someone facetiously, "he's hidden himself in the Bastille! Faith, it wouldn't be past him."

"Ha!" exclaimed an officer. "I hear they caught some escaped prisoner last night—might be Cyrano by mistake, if he had a nose!"

"What's that?" asked d'Artagnan quickly. "An escaped prisoner? Where?"

"Damme if I know," and the officer shrugged. "I understand they found him drunk in some tavern in Rue St. Etienne—a man who escaped some time ago. What's all this about Briocci? Somebody ought to go over there and wreck that cursed Italian's outfit—teach him to play his damned monkey-tricks on gentlemen!"

D'Artagnan gestured to Porthos, paid the score, and rose. Outside, in the street, he caught the other's arm.

"Attention, now! We're on the trail. To the Rue St. Etienne, and inquire in every wineshop we pass. Forward!"

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"Aye, and a drink with every inquiry," hiccuped Porthos genially. "Forward!"

D'Artagnan, now afire with impatience, hurried his companion along and presently they were instituting their search. They had little to go on, and owing to its proximity to student quarters, the street in question was replete with cabarets. Porthos, too, insisted stubbornly upon priming each inquiry with a drink, which took time. And they met with no luck at all.

It was nearly four o'clock when d'Artagnan led his now staggering comrade into a small wineshop, not a block from Cyrano's lodgings. It was empty. Porthos called for wine, while d'Artagnan instituted cautious inquiries of the proprietor. To his sharp delight, the host nodded assent.

"You are comrades of his? Good. It was last night, m'sieu, in this room. Regard! Poor M. de Bergerac was here with a friend—they broke in suddenly, seized on his friend, hauled him out, and all without a word, mind you! Service of the king. An évadé from the Bastille, someone said—hm! Perhaps and perhaps not. A very proper gentleman——"

Vaugon retaken, then—what devilish luck!

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"And M. de Bergerac?"

"In the rear room, m'sieu. Ah—there he goes again! He's beautifully drunk, I can tell you. Listen to his Greek and Latinity, would you?"

In fact, the voice of Cyrano broke upon them, faintly sonorous, rolling forth a maudlin flood of words from the rear room.

"Man is not a beast because he looks down!" bel-
lowed the voice. "Ha! A beast looks up, and why? Because he seeks to complain to heaven of his condition, quite naturally! A man looks down in order to contemplate the creation of which he is lord and master—for there's nothing in heaven to cause him any envy. Ovid says it, messieurs, plainly enough—'Os homini sublime dedit' and so forth. If you accept the thesis, damme if you don't have to accept——"

D'Artagnan shoved his way into the rear room. There sat Cyrano, a heap of empty bottles around him. He was alone, shut up with himself, pouring forth a pseudo-philosophic rhapsody, staring blankly at the world from bloodshot, unseeing eyes. He did not know d'Artagnan in the least.

"By the saints!" hiccuped Porthos. "He's drunk

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as a lord! Can't arrest a drunken man, that's certain——"

"Nor make him talk," said d'Artagnan. "Catch hold, now! Up with him."

The stupid guardsman had the strength of three. Between them they dragged Cyrano to his feet. He could scarce walk, much less protest or realize what was going on. They got him out to the street, and the obliging host followed with a bucket of water, thoroughly dousing the unhappy profligate.

Cyrano protested then, stoutly enough. Spluttering, fighting, roaring, he broke away from them and rushed back to his den. His head was somewhat cleared, however, and when d'Artagnan followed, he recognized the cadet.

"Ha! It's you, rascally Gascon! No use—can't arrest our Vaugon now, blast you! They got him, took him back to the Bastille—safe from you there, eh? This is a scurvy trick to play a comrade—who soaked me with water—you, M. de Portau? Blast you! Poor Cyrano's done for, anyhow He'll never hold sword again, has sworn never to draw blade—or he'd put a point in your fat throat!"

Bastille! D'Artagnan went cold at this confirmation of his fears. He broke into queries, and pres-

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ently wormed out of Cyrano how Vaugon had been recognized by his jailer and had been promptly apprehended. He tried to get some information about the letter he had given Richelieu, but here Cyrano's brain refused to click.

"Letter? No letter at all—only one right here, left at my lodgings for Vaugon. Here it is—keep it," and he flung down a sealed and folded document addressed to Vaugon in his care. "I'll give it to you, devil take your sharp eyes! Take it and clear out. For a pistole I'd crack a bottle over your head—don't like your face and never did."

"Nor I yours, you hawk-nosed imbecile!" growled d'Artagnan. However, he took the letter and called Porthos. "I'll give him up to you, my friend," he said, indicating the dropping, maudlin Cyrano. "Take him, drink with him, sober him if you can—the saints and angels defend you if you take him to the cardinal in this condition! Farewell. I've enough worries of my own."

So saying, he left the two there in company, slammed the door, ordered a bottle of wine, and flung himself down at a table in the outer room to think. Examination of the letter to Vaugon showed

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an illegible seal, so he pocketed it and considered his own situation with increasing gloom.

D'Artagnan was, to speak plainly, in a desperate strait. He had absolutely no choice, and no excuse would avail him. If he showed up with word that Vaugon was in the Bastille, the cardinal would then learn everything about Vaugon—probably had guessed it anyway. This worried d'Artagnan no whit. He was occupied entirely with his own emergency. Bastille or not, failure had no excuse, and failure meant absolutely no mercy, no forgiveness, his whole future blasted. The cardinal had promised him a cell in such event, and would most surely keep that promise to the letter.

With a hearty Gascon oath, d'Artagnan produced his order of arrest and read it over and over, despondently. Suddenly he checked himself, frowning. He looked more closely at the paper, glanced up, stared speculatively at the street, and his eyes widened. An eager breath flared his nostrils, as a dog who scents game. Hastily, he examined his purse, found it still fairly well supplied, and leaped to his feet.

"Cadédis!" he exclaimed. "Not for his sake, but for my own—I'll try it!"

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He flung down a coin, caught up his hat, and rushed out into the street.

On the eastern side of Paris, beyond which had pushed the Faubourg St. Antoine, and with its triangular bastion pointing toward this faubourg, stood the Bastille. Its eight massive and gigantic towers appeared like so many vast cannon set on end and threatening heaven itself.

Its huge stones were blackened by four centuries. Primarily erected to defend Paris against the English, it now appeared rather to menace Paris; from a royal chateau, it had been converted into a royal prison by Richelieu. On the side toward Paris, the slime-filled moats and ancient walls were masked by other buildings crowded close. On the Rue St. Antoine, just past the convent of the Filles de Ste. Marie, was a massive entrance that opened on a wide tree-filled court surrounded by shops and dwellings, where the families of the garrison lived. This fortress was in itself a small city.

There were no embarrassing formulas, no questions, no noise, about the entry of this fortress. No papers need be shown. Three bare words sufficed. Those who entered, all too often without knowing why, also remained without knowing where or when,

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and if they departed, it was without knowing either why, where or how.

Late in the afternoon, an hour or more after d'Artagnan had discovered the hopeless Cyrano in his hiding-place, a coach with closed shutters came rumbling from the direction of Paris and halted at the Rue St. Antoine gate of the Bastille. The sentinel there barred the way with his one question.

"Ordre du Roi!" came the response.

At these three magic words, the sentinel stepped aside and presented arms. "The King's Order!" The horses tugged at the coach, the rumbling wheels passed the gate and crossed the wide court within; but those magic words had already gone ahead. Shop-windows were hurriedly closed, loiterers vanished from sight. In a moment, the huge court became empty, deserted, silent. Curiosity was dangerous.

The coach disappeared at the other end of the court. It crossed a large bridge and came to another inner court, this one paved, treeless, bleak in appearance. At the bottom of this second court was a very pretty house, with a little park behind it; in this house lived the Governor of the Bastille.

Here the coach stopped, a question was asked by

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the driver, he was directed onward. Continuing its way through the park, the coach came presently to a wall two hundred feet high, and halted before a slimy green moat. Opposite was an iron-grilled door, the only opening in this massive wall.

Once more the three magic words rang out. With clang and clatter, a drawbridge descended, the portcullis was raised, and the coach finally entered the Bastille itself, the courtyard surrounded by those massive towers, each of which had a name.

The coach halted, its door opened, and d'Artagnan descended.

"M. du Tremblay?" he inquired of the soldier who met him.

"He is with the chief jailer, m'sieu. Will you follow?"

D'Artagnan assented, but from a doorway appeared the jovial figure of the governor himself, who advanced cordially.

"Ha, monsieur! You bring me another guest?"

"Not so," said d'Artagnan. "I come to relieve you of a guest."

"In any case, welcome! Come, we've a fire in here and can be comfortable while we discuss the matter."

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D'Artagnan grimaced and did not reply to this pleasantry. He knew Tremblay by reputation, and was counting heavily upon what he had heard. He bowed in a very cold manner which caused the governor to lose his genial aspect.

"By all means, M. du Tremblay," he said frostily. "Of course His Eminence can wait, so let us seek the fire and warm ourselves."

"Devil take it, you have orders—I must read them, and it's getting too dark here to make out a word! Come inside, with lights and warmth."

D'Artagnan, confident he had struck the right note, smiled to himself and followed the governor into a large room where a fire burned and candles shone. The governor had been going over his massive register of "guests" with the chief jailer, whom he now dismissed.

"Well, monsieur?" he inquired a trifle nervously. "His Eminence knows that we have recaptured the prisoner recently escaped?"

D'Artagnan did not reply, except by holding out his order of arrest. Tremblay took it, with a disturbed air, and held it to the candles. He looked up, astonished.

"But, monsieur—this is not an order to deliver a

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prisoner to you! This is an order to arrest—and for a man named Vaugon! We have, I assure you, no one of that name here.”

Now, d’Artagnan knew perfectly well that he was risking his neck in this matter, and had only been driven to it by desperation. His one chance of success lay in persuading Tremblay that the governor risked his own neck by disobedience. He knew, too, things no one was supposed to know about Vaugon.

With a glance at the closed door, d’Artagnan threw off his icy manner, came close to the governor, and tapped the latter on the arm. He must take a chance here.

“Come, come, my dear sir!” he said, smiling. “We’re alone, we do not need to bandy words, we may speak frankly—eh? It’s most unfortunate you did not see His Eminence today.”

“Eh, eh?” Tremblay stared at him. “But I went to the Palais Cardinal this morning! He was too busy to see me—I left the report of the recapitulation——”

D’Artagnan repressed a sharp breath. What a discovery! It delighted him, as did the evidence of Tremblay’s agitation.

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"Just so," he said coolly. "This Vaugon was recognized in a wineshop last night, was seized and brought here—so far, excellent! But, my dear M. du Tremblay, why didn't you advise His Eminence of it last night? There's the whole difficulty!"

"The devil!" exclaimed Tremblay. "Because—in confidence, eh?"

D'Artagnan bowed to conceal his keen delight. What target had his blind shot reached?

"Upon the word of a gentleman," he replied. The other took his arm confidently.

"Because, my dear fellow, I knew nothing of it until this morning! There was a little party last night in the apartment of Marshal de Bassompierre—you comprehend?"

D'Artagnan comprehended thoroughly, for the governor had a certain reputation. Now he was fairly sure of himself.

"Well, His Eminence is furious," said d'Artagnan. "Come! Do you insist that you have no Sieur Vaugon here?"

Somewhat uncertainly, the governor pointed to his massive register.

"See for yourself. It is true that a passport was

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taken from the escaped prisoner, and this passport bore the name you mention, but——”

“M. du Tremblay, we speak as friends,” said d’Artagnan with a confidential air. “When I was given this order of arrest, shall I tell you what was said? Not to me, of course—it was not even intended for my ears. But—does it interest you?”

“Yes, yes! What did His Eminence say?” demanded the other quickly.

“Just this. That no order of release was to hand; and that, if an order signed by the king and his minister, with a note added in the minister’s own hand, would not allow me to bring a prisoner to the presence of that minister, something must be done about it! Now, I leave to your imagination, my dear Tremblay, what might be done. It is even possible this order might be a test of your good faith, of your obedience—you see?”

Tremblay dropped into a chair, troubled.

“But, devil take it! It’s not an order to deliver a prisoner—it’s not the right form! It’s not the wording——”

“May I ask,” said d’Artagnan, “under what name your prisoner is entered?”

The governor started. “This—this Vaugon?”

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"Exactly. This Vaugon. He's an ordinary prisoner, is he?"

"Not a bit of it," said the governor. "Not a bit of it! The whole thing, my dear sir, is most unusual——"

D'Artagnan waved his hand. "Exactly. So is this order! For the love of the saints, monsieur, use your good sense! Was I not sent here to get him? Didn't the cardinal personally send me, write that order with his own hand? Look at the wording of it! It's to take precedence above all other orders or acts! What the devil more can you desire?"

"It's not the correct form," objected Tremblay.

"Granted." D'Artagnan shrugged. "The whole point is that His Eminence sent me to bring this man before him, desiring to interrogate him personally and privately. There's his signature in evidence, which I'm to leave with you in exchange, as a receipt, after signing it. Now, consider! Is such a receipt satisfactory or not? If not, I return to my coach, I return to the Palais Cardinal, I tell His Eminence that you refuse to surrender M. Vaugon to the express order of the king and his minister. Upon my word, my dear Tremblay, I shouldn't like to be in

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your shoes when such a message reaches Richelieu! However, since it's your choice——"

"For the love of heaven, hold on!" exclaimed Tremblay in some agitation. "Beyond doubt, you're right enough—yes, yes, you have the right of it! *Corbac!* You've the right of it, my friend. But here's the *hic* of the whole thing—this order under which our man is held *au grand secret!* Now, I've no M. Vaugon to deliver to you. No such name appears on my register. He's down as M. Personne, you comprehend?"

D'Artagnan cursed the petty formalities of this by no means petty place.

"It seems to me, monsieur, that if you found on your prisoner a passport signed by the king, and made no mention of the fact either on your register or in the report which you left with His Eminence——"

"Ha!" Tremblay started up, and d'Artagnan knew the shot had gone home. "Come here, come here, let's see about it! I believe you've the right of it, curse me if you haven't! Here, move those candles a bit closer——"

Tremblay leaned over the huge register on its rack, and d'Artagnan joined him. The finger of

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the governor fell upon the last entry, dated that same morning. After the name of "M. Personne" was the entry:

"Bearing passport in the name of Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

"There's your *hic* and your *hoc*," said d'Artagnan, and glanced at the clock on the wall, which indicated a few minutes after six. "Diable! I must ask for your decision instantly, my dear governor. His Eminence made a definite appointment with me, and I intend to be there to the minute. You've no possible excuse now—here's the name of Vaugon on your books! However, suit yourself. I'll return without my prisoner, and you'll answer——"

The governor sighed. "You assume full responsibility, of course, when you receipt for him? Good." He leaned over and struck a bell. His chief jailer appeared. "You will summon the head turnkey, monsieur, and bring to us the prisoner named M. Personne, last evening returned to our hospitality and placed in the Basinière. And now, monsieur, the receipt?"

D'Artagnan had won.

"Receipt on delivery," he said, and dropped into a chair. Tremblay laughed.

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"Correct enough, I suppose. Hm! Where was that cursed passport put? We'll have to give it back to your gentleman. You'll return him to me later?"

D'Artagnan shrugged. "Ask M. Duplessis, not me! I have a strong suspicion that I will. Between you and me, His Eminence is in a stormy mood today."

"So I learned this morning," said the governor, and d'Artagnan blessed the latter's morning visit to the Palais Cardinal. Although Tremblay's brother was Père Joseph, the so-called "gray eminence," familiar and confidant of Richelieu, the jovial governor knew all too well how any mis-step would be none the less fatal to him.

Five minutes passed. The scrape of feet was heard, and between two jailers Vaugon was led into the room. At sight of d'Artagnan there, a gleam shot into his eyes, and his shoulders straightened a trifle. Despondency had weighed heavily on him this day, and despair had sunk into his heart and soul—yet here was d'Artagnan! And Tremblay's next words enlightened him, sent his shoulders still more erect.

"Monsieur, this gentleman has come to remove you from our hospitality for a little while. I trust

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you have no complaints? Well, and now for the receipt——”

D'Artagnan produced his order of arrest, countersigned it, then signed again the paper Tremblay handed him—the regular form of receipt for departing guests.

“This is all?”

“All,” echoed the governor. He had been handed the few belongings of Vaugon, and now restored them, passport and money included. Entirely unaware of what was happening, not daring to ask, Vaugon said nothing. D'Artagnan turned ceremoniously to him.

“Monsieur, will you have the goodness to accompany me?”

Vaugon assented silently.

In another five minutes they were in the coach, taking leave of Tremblay. A moment afterward, the coach was rumbling out through the inner portal, crossing the park and the bleak square beyond. Not until the outer entrance was passed and they were actually in the streets of Paris, did either of the two men speak. Then Vaugon's voice broke the silence, tremulously.

“D'Artagnan! Is this a miracle?”

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"Faith, I think myself that it is!" and d'Artagnan uttered a short laugh. "Richelieu gave me an order of arrest, to bring you before him. I found you were in the Bastille—and persuaded Tremblay to hand you over. I had the devil's own job of it. What will come of it I don't know, but I want your parole—to save my own neck."

"You have it, and my thanks," said Vaugon simply.

"Let thanks wait—you may be out of the pan and into the fire! Shall we let this coach go and get some supper? It's six-thirty—we've time enough and to spare."

"If you like. Where's Cyrano?"

"Drunk. Arrested. Heaven knows where! Wait—he gave me a letter for you. Too dark to see now, though. Let's dismiss this coach—I hired it for the occasion. We'll drop into the nearest tavern and get a bite to eat and a bottle of wine."

"Find Cyrano," said Vaugon.

D'Artagnan shrugged, and directed the driver to the wineshop where he had left Porthos and Cyrano. When the coach halted, it was paid off and dismissed, and the two entered the cabaret. The host recognized d'Artagnan and bowed—then he recog-

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nized Vaugon, fell into a blank stare, and his eyes became like saucers.

"Not you, m'sieu—not the gentleman taken to the Bastille——"

"Bah! That was a joke," said d'Artagnan. "Where are our two friends?"

"Gone, m'sieu. Gone ten minutes ago, each of them holding up the other. I believe they started for the Palais Cardinal, but they'll be a long while on the way. M. de Bergerac appeared to be sobering—at least, he was able to walk."

"Very well. We'll occupy the rear room for a space—give us wine, food, whatever you can."

Vaugon followed him, and when they were seated with the door closed, d'Artagnan smiled.

"Faith, you look dressed for a court ball! Where'd you get all the finery? And have you heard about Cyrano and the monkey——"

"I was there," said Vaugon.

For some time they talked, exchanging news—then d'Artagnan clapped hand to pocket.

"That letter Cyrano gave me—here it is! Also, the document with the king's promise to Sieur Vaugon—good! I had a hard time getting it out of

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Mazarin, plague take that Italian cat! But here it is. What's the letter?"

Vaugon took the folded and sealed paper, opened it, and held it to the light. To his astonishment, it bore the same signature as that on the other document:

"Admit Sieur Vaugon to our presence this evening.
LOUIS."

He passed it to d'Artagnan, who read it and whistled.

"Cadédis! You're the only man in Paris with three signatures of His Majesty in your pocket this minute—and an appointment with the cardinal. That'll spoil all three of them, I'm afraid. Listen! Do you want to go to the Louvre here and now, chance everything, see the cardinal later? There's just time. Yes or no?"

Vaugon pocketed the papers with a weary gesture. He knew the pass had been obtained for him by Mlle. de Closset, but now——

"No," he said. "My friend, I must face the thing out with Richelieu—as well now as another time. He asked you about the mole on my cheek,

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eh? Then he's recognized me. Face it like a man, see what happens—and whine to the king for help later on if needs must! I want to end the suspense.”

“As you like. Another thing—can you tell me what was in the letter you gave me—the warning for Richelieu?”

Vaugon's brows lifted. “The warning? Nothing but a warning, I suppose. Cyrano didn't say what else might be in it. But——”

“Bah! Let it pass. We'll eat, drink and be merry—this time tomorrow, both of us may be in the Bastille!”

Vaugon shivered slightly. This long day back in his dungeon again had nearly broken him.

CHAPTER XIV

LIKE most men who have won to thorough success in one field, Richelieu deemed himself more highly gifted in another. That "Rachel" was to be performed with the king and court in attendance meant far more to him than the fact that an hour or two afterward he would be the dominant figure at the royal ball and supper in the Louvre. He was an indifferent dramatic poet, yet he privately delighted more in his stage triumphs than in all his political mastery.

That evening, robed in scarlet glory, Richelieu spent the last half-hour before departing for the performance in going over the day's despatches. He would meet his enemies face to face that evening—those of his enemies who remained in Paris to face him. That he be prepared in advance against innuendo, calumny, and covert hatred was imperative; each latest report must be in his mind, each fragment of news from the great system of

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intelligence he had built up across most of Europe. He must be ready, not only to meet the unexpected, but to crush it with a word.

That the cardinal was in excellent spirits this evening was plain enough to all, and the news from abroad was good. England had received the exiled queen-mother, but dared not insist that France receive her back. The Duke of Lorraine was in Nancy, but appeared quite impotent. The Spaniards were extremely polite, which meant they were afraid. The only cloud on the horizon hovered over Sedan, where Comte de Soissons and Duc de Bouillon remained in seeming lethargy. Nothing had been heard from Chevreuse, but in this quarter no news was good news. As to enemies closer home, only Richelieu knew what would happen when he came face to face with Cinq-Mars this evening, and the old cardinal was grimly smiling at the thought.

Mazarin entered and advanced deferentially, with an impressive air. The wily Italian had but one present aim and purpose in life—to render himself absolutely indispensable to Richelieu. He had his own ways of doing this, and succeeded admirably. He even managed deftly to impose his own policies upon the cardinal, to a certain extent. Richelieu

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made his foes the enemies of France, and killed them. Mazarin played with his as with pawns on a board, for Mazarin had the magnificent faculty of ignoring personal enmities or even insults, and then turning them to his advantage.

"Your Eminence will recall the matter of M. de Bergerac?"

"Eh? Oh, the duellist poet!" Richelieu leaned back and smiled. "Yes. What's this tale I heard today about the monkey of Briocci? Is it true?"

"Quite true, Monseigneur. M. de Bergerac, it seems, has not yet been arrested—and very luckily. The whole city is laughing over that story. If Bergerac were now brought to the scaffold for duelling—well, Your Eminence can see that the entire effect would be irremediably lost!"

Richelieu had not thought of the matter, but it was quite clear that Mazarin was right. The effect would certainly be lost.

"So the monkey of Briocci has saved the neck of M. de Bergerac? Droll! A situation for a comedy, eh?" and the cardinal actually laughed indulgently. "None the less, I desire to interrogate Bergerac myself when I return from the Luxembourg."

"Your Eminence has seen the report of M. de

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Tremblay regarding the recapture of an escaped prisoner?"

"Eh?" Richelieu looked up sharply. "No. Where is it?"

Mazarin had deftly sequestered this report until he could deliver it himself, and he now produced the document.

"M. du Tremblay was here this morning, while you were closeted with the Spanish envoy."

The minister glanced over the report, and laid it down.

"That cadet of the guards, M. d'Artagnan, has not asked for me?"

"He has not been here, Monseigneur."

"Give me an order of delivery," and Richelieu smiled grimly, at thought of d'Artagnan's hopeless errand. "Send one of the guard in here, if you please."

He leaned over the table, wrote rapidly, and had just signed the order when a guardsman entered and saluted. Richelieu glanced up, nodded, and handed him the order.

"Go to the Bastille and bring this prisoner here to me at eight-thirty. Be waiting with him in the

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court. Take full precautions, but no escort will be needed."

The guardsman departed. Richelieu relaxed in his seat.

"I'll return here after the performance, but shall wait in the courtyard in my coach. I don't want to move about, you understand. Must save myself for the Louvre. I can't afford to collapse there, of all places. No further news?"

Mazarin came closer, murmured a name, said that the man was waiting. Richelieu stiffened and made an imperative gesture. Mazarin went to the door and returned with a dark-faced and powerful man wearing the soiled robes of a Capucin friar. This man was the head of the intelligence service in Sedan.

"You!" exclaimed the minister. "When did you arrive?"

"Just now, Monseigneur," and the Capucin inclined his head. "I came straight here."

Richelieu glanced at the clock, triumph in his eye. He would be armed now, armed against them all!

"News?"

"So important that I dared not trust it to letter."

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Mazarin had discreetly melted into the shadows, but Richelieu turned to him.

"You may go, M. de Mazarin. Thank you."

Left alone, the Capucin came to the table, leaned over, and spoke in a very low voice.

"My news was important—my ride was more important. On the road this morning I met a party of cavaliers. Among them was Mme. de Chevreuse, garbed as a man. They were making for the frontier."

Richelieu gestured impatiently. Even this message did not disturb his good humor.

"Bah! Let them ride. Speak quickly, I'm pressed for time! Your news?"

"Chevreuse has reached Don Antonio Sarmiento, governor of the Low Countries; she has seduced him personally and politically. He will send troops and officers to the Comte de Soissons, who intends to begin open war from Sedan as soon as the snow clears. Further, he has arranged a payment of a thousand écus per month to MM. de la Valette and Soubise, who undertake to raise the Protestants of Guyenne in revolt at the same moment. Olivares, the Spanish ambassador here, is in communication with Comte de Soissons in regard to a Spanish

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army moving against our southern frontier at the same time. Olivares has promised nothing and remains discreet, but will probably act as desired. M. Cinq-Mars has undertaken to make a Spanish treaty if our army moves south in the spring, but of this I have no evidence."

The eyes of Richelieu gleamed frostily, and his long, delicate fingers moved slightly as though in the act of crushing something.

"And what evidence have you of the rest?" he demanded coldly. "If Soissons revolts—good; I will add Sedan to France. If the Spaniards move—good; I will move the frontiers of France to the Pyrenees! But—what evidence? Letters? Despatches? I must be certain."

The Capucin rested mute, his gaze meeting the probing regard of Richelieu silently. The cardinal frowned.

"I absolve you. Speak!"

"The evidence of the confessional, Monseigneur. You may be entirely certain."

Even the red minister was startled at this, and for an instant, a look of repugnance flashed over his face, then was gone. He did not ask further; he

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knew he could depend on this man. The clock sounded, and he rose.

"Good! Now let them speak if they dare, to-night! Ah, traitors—I have you once more in my hand!"

And catching up a furred cloak from a chair, he hurried from the room as though twenty years had dropped from his shoulders. In another five minutes he was rolling toward the Luxembourg Palace, on the left bank.

Time passed. Shortly before eight, a coach came into the great courtyard of the Palais Cardinal. An officer jumped out hastily, dashed into the building, and was presently standing before Mazarin, to whom he made a somewhat agitated report.

"You are positive?" exclaimed the Italian.

"I saw the receipt and signature myself. M. d'Artagnan carried off the prisoner a good two hours ago, on order of His Eminence."

Mazarin touched a bell, and secretary appeared.

"Has M. d'Artagnan, a cadet of the guards, arrived here with a prisoner?"

"He has not, certainly—"

"When he comes, bring him to me."

Mazarin, however, was fated not to be before-

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hand with his master in this affair, since d'Artagnan had neither the need nor the intention of applying for admission. While Mazarin was puzzled, he attached small importance to this news, for as yet he did not know that Vaugon and the mysterious M. Personne of the Bastille were one and the same man.

The wide inner court of the palace, securely shut off from all the world, now began to shine ruddily with torches and cressets, while the galleries surrounding it were grouped with men, knots of horses standing waiting in the corners. Short as was the distance to the Louvre, the minister was going in state with a company of guards to attend him; and since everyone knew His Eminence to be in excellent humor tonight, there was no constraint in the air.

A sudden hum of voices, an astonished murmur, passed among the groups of guards, then there was an abrupt stir of movement. Two figures had appeared, arm in arm, figures only too well known to their comrades. A laugh started up, but was instantly stilled. M. de Portau and M. de Bergerac, both obviously drunk, came to a halt, stood leaning against each other, and stared vacuously around.

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"Pris'ner for 's Eminence," hiccuped Porthos vacantly. "Where's 's Eminence, eh?"

"In the devil's name, take care of those two fools!" said someone. There was a buzz of voices and a burst of laughter at mention of Briocci's monkey. The two were surrounded.

Porthos, swaggering and boasting, was persuaded in one direction. Cyrano, ragged, miserable, stupefied and unprotesting, was led in another. Heroic measures were taken, and for Cyrano were provided baldric and sword, with a cloak to partially hide his shabby attire. Since no one had great belief that Cyrano could possibly be very drunk, restoratives were chiefly applied to Porthos, who was utterly lost if he appeared in such a condition with a prisoner. Cyrano, indeed, seemed rather dazed than drunk, and would not utter a word.

Presently the pair were led back into the courtyard, now ablaze with lights from all sides. M. de Portau was at least in control of himself, and realized his position. A swift warning came from the gates.

"To stations! To stations! His Eminence comes!"

Instantly the two figures were left alone, there

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was a scramble for saddles, and about the galleries the guards took their places. A rattle of hooves, a rumble of wheels, and into the courtyard rolled the huge state coach of the minister, coming to a halt before the palace entrance. The coach window opened, showing the face of Richelieu half muffled in furs. Servants came forth with hot wine and food, but Richelieu dismissed them curtly. Now M. de Portau came forward and saluted.

"Your Eminence, I have brought M. de Bergerac as you desired."

"Very well. Come forward, M. de Bergerac," said the dry voice of Richelieu, and Cyrano obeyed like an automaton. Richelieu glanced around. "Where is the gentleman I sent to bring a prisoner from the Bastille?"

The guardsman in question made his appearance and saluted.

"Your Eminence, the prisoner had already been removed. He was no longer there."

"What?" The brows of Richelieu drew down, as he looked at the man. "Do you dare to jest with me, monsieur?"

"By no means, Your Eminence. He had previ-

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ously been removed by M. d'Artagnan, at your command and upon your warrant."

Two figures detached themselves from the shadows of the gallery. D'Artagnan advanced, twirling his mustache, fully appreciating the moment, and was followed by Vaugon. The gaze of Richelieu rested upon them, and d'Artagnan saluted.

"Your Eminence ordered me to bring this gentleman to you," he said. "Therefore I have brought him—from the Bastille. I have the honor to present M. Vaugon."

Cyrano turned, stared at them, his jaw fallen in stupefaction. For a long moment Richelieu was silent, sitting there face to face with Vaugon, who bowed and waited. If the cardinal had any doubts in the matter, they were quelled by a long sigh and a startled, half-muffled exclamation which burst from Cyrano.

"Mordious! It's you, Vaugon—you? Or else I'm drunk still."

"Advance, M. Vaugon, and M. de Bergerac," said Richelieu, his tone vibrant and piercing. "I wish to have a word with you two gentlemen."

They obeyed, the others remaining at a little distance. Richelieu was in keen good humor. He had

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just come from a most flattering triumph at the Luxembourg; despite the adulation underlying that triumph, it pleased none the less. He was going, as he very well knew, to a sharper and more sweeping triumph at the Louvre. The man and the minister, the poet and the politician, were equally warmed and melted in the tide of this night's victory. For once, Richelieu was in mood for jesting, but his jests were not those of ordinary men.

Meeting the steady gaze of Vaugon, Richelieu examined him attentively.

"Who are you, M. Vaugon?" he asked crisply.

Vaugon extended his folded passport.

"If Your Eminence will glance at this, you'll see that I am, over the signature of His Majesty, Sieur Nicolas Vaugon."

Richelieu took the passport, opened it, glanced through it curiously. Then his gaze struck again at Vaugon, as he returned it.

"I do not care to bandy words, Monsieur," he said coldly. "Your former name?"

"Your Eminence may remember it," said Vaugon. "As for me, I have forgotten it, and am content."

"So?" Richelieu studied him in some surprise, probed the face so oddly grave for its youth, met

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the calm and unflinching eyes. "Upon my word, M. Vaugon, I begin to think that when I put you in the Bastille, I did wrong!"

"You did," came Vaugon's laconic assent.

Those who heard, caught their breath. D'Artagnan made a hopeless gesture, giving up all for lost. Richelieu, who for many a long day had not heard so uncompromising an accusation delivered to his very face, started, frowned, stared hard at Vaugon. Then his eyes shifted to the half-stupefied Cyrano.

"Yesterday," he said slowly, "I received a letter bearing the name of one man, the arms and seal of another. Which of you two gentlemen can explain it?"

Vaugon, being ignorant of the contents of Cyrano's letter, held his peace. But Cyrano turned, blinked at the cardinal, and wakened. An abrupt laugh burst from him, a half-maudlin guffaw.

"Mordious! Your Eminence means our letter, eh? Come, that's droll enough!" A sudden flood of garrulity broke from his lips. "You see, Monseigneur," he cried, with familiarity that drew a gasp from the listeners, "Vaugon and I are good comrades, excellent comrades—trust each other ab-

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solutely! Well, we pitched upon the secret of that shabby rascal who's called M. le——"

"No names, if you please!" cut in the icy voice of Richelieu. For an instant it had a sobering effect. Cyrano managed a bow.

"Right, Your Eminence, no names! Well, we had this secret, you see? Devilish worthwhile secret, too! We don't like that sort of thing by half, I can tell you! Vaugon isn't what you'd call a Cardinalist, not by a good deal, and for that matter neither am I; but we know a great man when we see one——"

D'Artagnan, seeing that Cyrano was apt to mouth anything that came into his head, with a scandalous and damning lack of all respect or caution, stepped forward to intervene.

"Back, if you please, M. d'Artagnan," said the minister dryly. "It seems that for once I am hearing the truth spoken. It is a pleasant novelty. Continue, M. de Bergerac!"

"Your Eminence is exactly right," said Cyrano affably, preening his mustache. "*In vino veritas!* I have a devilish lot of truth in me tonight, for a fact there's nothing like a drop or two of good wine—but where was I? Oh, yes! Well, the idea

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of a pack of cowardly rascals resting their rumps and planning to stick a knife into the only great man in France was a bit too much for us to stomach and there's the truth.

"Being a poet myself," continued Cyrano, "and knowing there are too few good poets in the world already, I resented the affair on the score of art. Your Eminence is a good poet, in my estimation. An occasional line here and there will bear tinkering, but on the whole there's no one else in France who has so much proper feeling for scansion, for the effect of a phrase well turned, for the *mot juste*—but you comprehend my meaning, eh?"

It was evident to d'Artagnan that Cyrano had wakened to his precarious position, and was by no means so drunk as he had appeared.

"I comprehend, M. de Bergerac," said the cardinal, with dry amusement. "And since I have heard of your poetical ability also, I respect your criticism. We were, I believe, on the subject of a letter? Let us return to it."

"Oh, yes, the letter!" said Cyrano easily. "Well, Vaugon and I decided there was only one thing to do. How to do it was the whole question. Here was that cursed rascal d'Artagnan trying to get his

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nose into the secret when it was none of his business—”

Richelieu shot a glance at d'Artagnan, who stiffened.

“—while the chances were a bit bad for Vaugon to reach Your Eminence without reaching the Bastille first,” went on Cyrano with a grand air. “So we made up a combination; Vaugon carried the thing in form of a letter, which I sealed, and I carried the thing in my head, and there we were! One of us was sure to get the word to you in time, eh?”

“Lucky thing we arranged it so, too! I got embroiled with that monkey who walked like a man. This duty-hound of a cadet arrested Vaugon and got into a mess himself—however, his devilish devotion to duty has its merits! Vaugon gave him the letter, it got to you—so everything's all right after all. Your Eminence has nothing to worry about now, and everybody's happy as a king.”

With a sweeping gesture, Cyrano staggered into a magniloquent bow and was silent.

Now, for the first time, comprehension broke fully upon Vaugon. His name must have been signed to that letter by the ever-generous Cyrano!

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Startled, Vaugon opened his lips to protest, then realized he could gain nothing and might lose everything by a word. Accept—he must accept the situation, could do nothing else! And after all, he did not regret the warning.

“Come here, M. Vaugon,” said the minister.

Vaugon came and stood close beside the coach. For an instant Richelieu’s brilliant old eyes searched him, then the cardinal spoke very softly, almost under his breath, so none other might hear.

“I have reason to think your word means something. Kindly tell me on what errand you and M. de Bergerac rode from Paris.”

“Our errand,” said Vaugon in the same low-pitched tone, “was to call at her chateau for Mlle. de Closset, and bring her to Paris. We accomplished it. She is here.”

“So. I know with whom you had an interview before your departure, monsieur. What relation had your errand with Mme. de Chevreuse, if you please?”

“None, upon my honor.”

“How, then, did you learn of the project outlined in that letter?”

“A certain gentleman boasted incautiously of

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what his dagger would do—and when. This was at the Loup Pendu, in the Forest of Verrieres, on Sunday last. He was overheard.”

“The afternoon of the king’s hunt—ah! I see it now!” Richelieu drew a sharp breath. “M. Vaugon, you have reason to be an enemy to me, I think. Why have you done this thing, then? Few of my enemies but would have rejoiced over the event of next Saturday, had you kept quiet.”

“Proving, Monseigneur,” said Vaugon, “that few of your enemies are gentlemen.”

Across the bleak, austere features framed in the window of the coach broke a shadowy smile.

“I cannot be less generous than the man whom I—or my agents—wronged. You have nothing more to fear from me, monsieur. May I ask your intentions as to the future?”

Vaugon bowed. “Your Eminence, I hope to obtain admission to the Louvre tonight and see His Majesty, and to ask that the name of Sieur Nicolas Vaugon be confirmed as my own. This is all I seek. I shall perhaps remain in France, perhaps go to England again—”

“Good. Then, monsieur, at the Louvre I shall

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have a further word with you. M. d'Artagnan, I instruct you to set your prisoner at liberty."

D'Artagnan saluted stiffly. He was quivering with rage and glaring at Cyrano, whose innuendoes had rendered him furious. The cardinal, too, glanced at Cyrano.

"Come! M. de Bergerac, another matter. Something over a week ago there occurred an affray upon the highway not far from Lonjumeau. Your appearance in that affray has been reported to me—"

"Ah, Your Eminence, that was a sad matter!" broke in Cyrano gustily. "Two poor devils were being surrounded and assaulted, murdered and assassinated by a whole pack of rascals! There was a thick fog to cover the work. Like any honest man, I came to their rescue. Do not, I beg of you, mention the matter again. It is not worth thanking me for, Monseigneur."

"I am seriously thinking of hanging you for it," said the minister, and at these words there fell a silence. Cyrano swallowed hard, and blinked at the austere, angry face framed in the coach window.

"Also," pursued Richelieu after a moment, "I had considered hanging you for dueling. However, M. de Bergerac, I do not see any particular

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good in hanging anyone, so instead, I pardon you freely on all counts. If in future——”

At this instant took place one of those trifling and unexpected happenings which seem due only to a malign destiny, yet which can change the course of lives or empires.

Cyrano stood gaping open-mouthed at the cardinal. A torch in its socket, on the wall above, spluttered and sent a few sparks floating down. One of these sparks lodged upon the ear of Cyrano.

Dropping hand to sword, Cyrano whirled about with a bellowing exclamation, his other hand clapping against his ear. His cocked-up rapier slapped sharply against d'Artagnan, who shoved him violently away. Cyrano staggered. His long hand lashed out, striking d'Artagnan squarely across the face. Whether by intention or by accident, none could say—but the blow was given. It all happened swiftly, swiftly.

“Gentlemen!” exclaimed the cardinal sharply.

“Bah!” broke out Cyrano, hand to ear, other hand to sword. “This rascal has been too damned devoted to duty for my taste, anyway——”

“Silence!” At the new, vibrant note in Riche-

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lieu's voice, even Cyrano felt the keen breath of peril. "M. d'Artagnan, what does this mean?"

For d'Artagnan had quietly drawn his sword. Now, holding it in both gloved hands, he brought up his knee and with one powerful effort snapped the blade. He dropped the pieces to the stones with a clang and saluted, livid with anger and restraint.

"Your Eminence," he returned, "there is only one method of chastisement open to a gentleman, and that is forbidden by edict. I have no other choice except to leave the service of His Majesty."

"You become a little bold, M. d'Artagnan," said Richelieu coldly. "You have earned the cassock of a guardsman—would you resign it before it is given?"

"Certainly, Your Eminence, unless I could wear it with honor."

Cyrano took an unsteady step forward. "Well, Your Eminence, he couldn't fight me in any event—that is to say, I wouldn't fight him. Poor Cyrano's done for. I've sworn an oath that I'll never draw sword again, after that cursed monkey——"

Richelieu pulled his furred robe closer, and a frosty smile touched his lips.

"M. d'Artagnan, you have appealed to me as a

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gentleman," he said. "Very well. Will someone have the kindness to provide M. d'Artagnan with another sword?"

In the torchlight, there was a scurry to obey, and one of the guards came forward, thrusting a rapier into the hand of d'Artagnan. The minister looked at Cyrano.

"Come, M. de Bergerac! I do not tolerate brawling. M. d'Artagnan has demanded satisfaction, and he shall have it. You two gentlemen have my permission to settle your quarrel here and now. The survivor will go to the Bastille on the spot. En garde, messieurs!"

For a moment stupefied astonishment held them both motionless, held all who heard paralyzed, for it was clear that Richelieu meant his words to the letter. Then Cyrano shook his head.

"Impossible, Your Eminence. I've sworn an oath——"

"And an admirable one," broke in Richelieu drily. "Having the power to absolve you from this oath, I do so for this occasion. Further, I beg that you'll honor me with a verse, after your rumored habit when engaged in the gentle art of duelling. On guard!"

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"On guard, monsieur!" echoed d'Artagnan coldly, and faced Cyrano.

The latter fumbled uncertainly at his baldric—then abruptly flung himself forward in position of defence. There was a stir of movement all around the courtyard as men craned to see better—here was such a duel as would be talked of for many a day! While it was clear that Richelieu was quietly amusing himself, his promise of the Bastille held good.

The blades touched and crossed—then a sudden sharp cry of anger broke from d'Artagnan.

"You think this is a jest, buffoon?"

What the exclamation meant, none could tell. Cyrano uttered a short laugh.

"Why not? A jest with death, my dear d'Artagnan! His Eminence has given the subject for a very pretty little verse—" both men were thrusting rapidly, d'Artagnan on the attack, Cyrano on the defense—"and we'll make the word 'death' the signal for a touch in the throat, eh? After the manner of that little rondelet on M. de Breuil——"

Vaugon stood watching frowningly. He, too, found something decidedly strange in this duel, yet could not place it—the ruddy flickering light, the

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shifting figures, were very deceptive. In the coach window was framed the countenance of Richelieu, watching with sparkling eyes.

The attack of d'Artagnan was angry yet cautious. For all his skill, he encountered a defense like a wall of steel; feet stamped, breaths came fast, there was now and again a ring of metal as the scraping blades touched the hilts. It was, in this first moment, fast and furious work, yet d'Artagnan could not break through that guard. And Cyrano was laughing at him, gaily, merrily.

"Come, a little more spring i' the wrist there! Not bad, not bad—at all events, I'm not facing a monkey tonight, eh? Aye, laugh on that if you like, d'Artagnan! I suppose the monkey had a funeral. Well, birth and death come fast—why, there's an excellent little couplet to start with, for the better amusement of His Eminence—wait, now until we try this riposte in tierce——"

Scrape and flash of blades, lunge quick-parried, then Cyrano went on calmly.

"A christening is gay
One day:
Then comes a fun'ral text
The next."

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"Not such a bad meter there—short, sharp, suited to the accompaniment, eh? So you know this Spanish feint and parry, do you? But of course you would—well, let's about it——"

Cyrano was off the defensive now, beginning a fast and vicious attack. D'Artagnan was cursing him softly, enraged and furious for some reason Vaugon could not divine. The blades crossed, held, licked in and out, disengaged.

"Nothing quite so appropriate as the subject of our verse," resumed Cyrano with his light and careless air. "Death comes to all alike, M. d'Artagnan—why, there's good meat for our second verse! All of us alike, man or woman——"

"A prostitute, a nun—
All's one!
A cardinal, an ass—
Both pass."

"Not very original, to be sure——" Cyrano leaped back from a deadly lunge, recovered, engaged the lightning rapier of d'Artagnan anew. "However, it'll pass—as we all must. Now for you, my friend! Look to the throat! We must not keep His Eminence waiting too long—must get about our final rhyme——"

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Perforce he fell silent, panting, under a superb attack that demanded all his skill and agility, while murmurs ran admiringly among the shadowy figures watching. Time after time, Vaugon saw the point of d'Artagnan drive in as though for certain finish, yet the wrist of Cyrano was better steel than his weapon. Vaugon frowned again—something odd about that rapier of Cyrano—what was it? The point out of line, perhaps, tempting thrust after thrust, yet ever warding them——

Ah! Now Cyrano was taking the offensive, attacking with a laugh, yet with so dazzling a skill, so deadly a precision, as to force d'Artagnan back, ever back. The white desperation of the cadet's face was evident to all; so were his furious curses, though not the reason for them. Cyrano pressed him hard, harder still.

"Coming, my friend, coming!" rang out the lightly mocking voice. "Remember the rhyme, I beg of you—remember the word 'death' as I foretold! We'll close the argument with the proper contrast in our final verse. His Eminence is a good craftsman, and appreciates the full effect of contrast, and——

"A cry, a gasp at earth—
That's birth!

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A sigh, a gasp o' breath—
That's—"

For one terrible instant Cyrano seemed to hang poised, immobile, motionless, like a bird above its prey. Then he fairly swooped. His rapier drove, drove again. D'Artagnan back in desperate, futile defense——

"That's death!" rang out the voice of Cyrano. His whole body seemed to uncoil in the lunge. Like an arrow his point went to the throat of d'Artagnan.

The cadet dropped his blade, which clattered on the stones. Staggering backward, he clapped both hands to his throat—then he regained his balance, stood there gasping, yet unhurt. The sharp cry bursting from the men around was drowned in a sharper cry, as Cyrano turned and flung his sword down in the full torch-light.

The weapon was still in its scabbard.

"Ah, Your Eminence!" Cyrano strode toward the coach, panting, his voice ringing out like a clarion. Gone of a sudden was all his drunken braggadocio. "This d'Artagnan is too good a swordsman, too splendid a soldier, to be lost to His Majesty! Cyrano has fought his last duel—fought it with the monkey of Briocci, the damned monkey! Cyrano is

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damned, too. Take me, then, send me to the Bastille if you like—but give my comrade d'Artagnan his cassock and his free pardon!"

It was an appeal magnificently generous, a splendid gesture. Nothing could restrain the sharp murmur of applause, the vividly emotional cries, breaking from the guards who heard it. Then fell dead silence again, and in this silence, Richelieu leaned forward in the coach-window. A slight smile seemed to touch his lips, and his hand moved in the gesture of benediction.

"M. de Bergerac," he said, "you're too good a poet to be lost to Parnassus. Go in peace—and remain in peace. Come to me in the morning, M. d'Artagnan, and we'll see about that cassock for you. Messieurs of the guard! We're late. To the Louvre."

The austere face disappeared, the window closed. A cracking of whips, and the horses plunged with a ringing spark-fire of hooves. Orders sounded. The guards filed out before and behind the coach. Rolling wheels, clattering hooves, torch-bearers—all went out through the high grilled gates of iron.

Gone were the guards, vanished was the shape of Vaugon, disappeared was d'Artagnan. Nothing moved in the vast courtyard save a few lackeys, ex-

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citedly talking as they extinguished the torches and replaced them with fresh ones for later lighting. Darkness closed in as the red sparks fell and were gone.

A single lone figure stood unmoving, then drew a hand across his eyes. After a moment Cyrano turned, looked around, uttered a low and bitter laugh. Alone, forgotten, he gathered his cloak around his shoulders and strode out of the Palais Cardinal.

CHAPTER XV

LATE that same night the dark-raftered room of the Pinecone, whose thick beams had echoed the wild laughter of François Villon and the sardonic jests of Rabelais, fell upon silence. The tobacco smoke thinned. The shouts of gamesters, the rattle of dice, the clatter of bottle and cup, had died.

The company had departed. One man alone remained—a gamester and a mad one, as the tumbled heap of gold on the table before him bore witness; a tremendous drinker, as the empty bottles around his feet testified. He still was drinking as he sat alone, his dark and brooding gaze staring out upon the room.

Suddenly the door swung open and a shivering gallant entered. As his scarf and gay costume tokened, M. de Cuigy was an officer in the Regiment de Conti, and more of a courtier than his friend at the table, whom he hailed with delight.

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"Ha, Savinien! By all the gods, where've you been today? All the world's been asking questions about you——"

"What have I to do with the world?" growled Cyrano. "Sit down. Drink. We'll be put out of here ere long."

"Not we." Cuigy swung into a chair, gasped at the pile of gold, and seized a bottle. "Gambling again—and with the devil's luck, eh? Damme, I couldn't get away from the Louvre until too late. We had fun enough there, and no mistake!"

He drank, set down his cup. "No end of gossip tonight, Savinien. Richelieu came in like a devastating angel—rumor says he has unearthed some new plot. He spoke to one and another, and left a veritable train of disaster behind him—ha! You should have seen Cinq-Mars turn white as a ghost! And——"

"Richelieu be damned," said Cyrano. "More wine, here! More wine! You and your gossip!"

M. de Cuigy laughed and regarded him. "Old gamester, you'll damn our cardinal once too often! Peste, man, you've a small fortune on the table!"

"Fortune be damned too," said Cyrano darkly.

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"I've resigned from the service, resigned from everything. I'm going to the moon."

"On the next bottle? Good! I'm with you. Why the resignation?"

"Why? In the devil's name, haven't you heard the story?"

"About the monkey? Bah!" M. de Cuigy put out a hand, gripped Cyrano warmly by the arm, and spoke with unexpected feeling. "Come, old friend, don't be a fool! You're too fine a soldier to be afraid of a laugh or two—nonsense! We'll help you stem the tide, be sure of it! Nobody will dare laugh to your face——"

"My friend, all of Paris laughs," said Cyrano gloomily. "No, the die is cast! If Henri Quatre couldn't fight Paris, I follow his example. I turn my back upon the world from this night."

"Eh? A tonsure?" The officer stared.

"Not a bit of it. A college. I shall become a philosopher. I'll enter the College of Lisieux and take to books."

"You're drunk," declared the other, and leaned back, relaxing. "Eh! You should have seen the Louvre tonight, my old one! And there was ro-

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mance in the air. A new gentleman came to court, and pox take me if he didn't have a private audience with the king and have a chat in the corner with Richelieu! Then he kissed the queen's hand and danced with Mlle. de Closset, who turned regular sheep's eyes on him—a devil of a thing! And by his garb a regular countryman, too.”

Cyrano's gaze bit up suddenly. “Who was he?”

“Some damned outlandish name,” said the officer carelessly. He took the long pipe tendered him by the waiter, held it to the proffered coal, and drew luxuriously at the tobacco.

“Comte de Vaugon, or some such name—the chamberlain announced it after his private audience. Never heard of it in my life, and neither did anyone else. Some say he's Prince Charles of England incognito, and another said he's a Spanish grandee. Bah! He's probably some country noble whose father lent Henri Quatre money. The luck of fools!”

Cyrano laughed harshly at this—a long, harsh, bitter laugh.

“The luck of fools!” he repeated. “Aye, good or bad, the luck of fools holds good—

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"Pox on your logic, sophistry and rules!
Some win success; and othersome in pools
Of Stygian drink forget what might have been—
God, what a world! It's all the luck of fools!"

And he brooded there above the table, a sombre
and prescient figure.

THE END

